CATHARSIS
5
TALES OF A WITCH'S FAMILIAR
ALBA LOCKWOOD

CATHARSIS

TALES OF A WITCH'S FAMILIAR

BOOK FIVE

ALBA LOCKWOOD

For Daisy
My inspiration and furry bestie
Love and miss you so much Darling Cat

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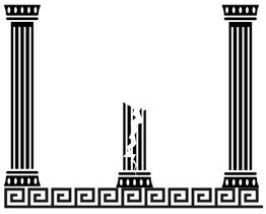
CHAPTER 1

ZAIDE



The acrid sting of smoke burned my eyes as I watched the two dragons—one shimmering green, the other blazing gold—twist and dive through the air. The green dragon's wings beat furiously as it darted through the smoky haze, desperate to evade the relentless pursuit of the golden one.

While the green dragon's identity was still a mystery, the golden one was Charlie, and gripping the scales on his back, her hair blowing wildly in the wind, was my soul pair. I couldn't tear my gaze from them, my chest tightening with every swoop and near collision that endangered Clawdia's precarious position.

Their figures grew smaller as they flew further and further away from our burning building. Only when they dipped out of sight, swallowed by the light of the setting sun, did the full weight of my helplessness crash over me, and the rising panic threatened to choke me like the thick soot smoldering on the roof.

Clawdia and Charlie chased the dragon away to protect us, but they were without our support, and we couldn't follow them. I sucked in a shaky breath and prayed. *Please stay safe until we can be together again.*

I rubbed my streaming eyes and allowed all the chaos surrounding me to come back into focus. Magic flared in bright colors, and shouts from the task team and their leaders reached my ears as they attempted to stop the flames and smoke from reaching us.

"Arabella, help us with this water spell," Elizabeth, Charlie's birth mother, called from the small group of witches under Arabella's task team

leadership.

Four witches stood in the opposite corner of the rooftop, sweating and sooty, as they held their hands up to the sky like they were calling to the clouds for rain. Arabella dashed over from Alcor's side to join them, and within moments, a droplet hit my face.

Alcor and Savida hovered over the blackened and still-smoking body of the protector, Sigurd, attempting to heal him with their fire. Their chants, although barely audible, should have been enough to heal someone, but with every passing moment, their voices rose, and their panic pushed their words faster. Yet there was no change to his body. It remained black, bloody, and motionless.

"Help us," Daithi hissed, his green eyes bright and furious against the background of darkness and smoke.

His ire was another shock and forced me out of my frozen state and into action. I scrambled to kneel at the protector's side, but as my gaze shifted to look for the lifelines in which I usually filled with power to heal, I found none.

Baelen joined me, placing a hand on my shoulder and announced solemnly, "He is dead. There is nothing else you can do."

"No. No, that can't be. We need him," Danica, the task team leader for the vampires, cried out. She flicked her fangs out and suggested, "I can turn him."

"He is gone," Baelen repeated. "You can't turn him without draining yourself to replace his blood loss, and no one expects that kind of sacrifice."

As the rain got heavier, the flames sizzled out, and the smoldering rooftop crackled loudly while we acknowledged our failure to protect Sigurd and our failure to protect the realm by not bringing him back. Drenched and cold from raindrops that seemed to burrow under my skin, I hung my head in shame.

With Sigurd dead, the realm would be open to slavers from other realms. The human realm had already been under a steady influx of otherworlders portaling in and kidnapping humans and supernaturals alike. However, when Sigurd was revived, his essence protected the realm from portal creation.

Without him, the portals will reappear. People of the human realm will be taken by otherworlders…just as my people were taken. Just as I was taken.

I shuddered at the memory.

“There has to be a way to bring him back,” Robert, the demon task team leader, muttered.

Baelen’s eyes flared dangerously. “He can’t be revived. The dragon singed him alive like roast meat. If his lungs didn’t burn from the inside out and suffocate him, then the burning skin caused him to bleed to death in an instant. He is dead.”

“You control blood, don’t you?” Isaac, the shifter task team leader, asked as he hovered nearby. “Can’t you just put the blood back inside him? Won’t that help heal him?”

“It’s cold blood. The cells are already dead,” Baelen stated.

“Try,” Elizabeth whispered. No longer calling down the rain with the witches, she hovered over my other shoulder, dripping. “Please try.”

Baelen sighed heavily and clenched his eyes shut for a moment before exchanging a quick glance with me. “I will try, but I guarantee nothing.”

“A man who has already been revived three times previously may yet surprise us,” Elizabeth replied.

Arabella directed her witches, as well as other members of the task team, to ensure the entire building was no longer aflame, while Baelen frowned in concentration. The drying blood moved slowly, like a snake escaping its shedding. It curled around lazily until the rich red color returned and slithered back inside the protector’s body.

I waited for the lifelines to appear, but they didn’t. I peered at my mate.

“Did it work?” I whispered.

He shook his head and replied quietly, “I’m trying to work the blood back into his veins and restart his heart, but something is wrong. My power feels weaker.”

“Weaker?” My eyes grew wide and I wanted to demand he stop…but the stare of the others were like daggers pointed at our backs. They wouldn’t forgive us if we didn’t try everything we could to bring him back.

Clawdia did this once before. We can do it again.

“Savida, Alcor, continue your chanting,” I instructed, and the demons’ wings shuddered with anxiousness, but they did as I demanded.

I stared and attempted to switch my vision from seeing the health lines to the blood lines, and just as I glimpsed the dark red lines, almost overwhelming my vision, they were gone.

Baelen let out a gasp and clenched his fists. His jaw locked, and I opened my mouth to ask what happened but stopped when someone screamed and a small canister rolled across the rooftop.

“We’re under attack!” Robert shouted. “Task team, get down there and prevent entry.”

Above us, a small machine whirled, and another canister dropped.

A blinding flash made my vision turn white for a long moment, and a loud bang sent me flinching away from the unknown danger.

What is happening? What is the canister? What is the machine? Who is attacking?

My mind spun as my heart started pumping like crazy and I reached for Baelen’s hand to pull him down into a crouch with me.

My vision returned moments later but Baelen’s gaze seemed to have remained fixed on the body of the protector. Yet as I checked the body again, there was no change.

He’s still dead. We can’t risk our lives up here for the dead.

Daithi pulled a chanting Savida away and followed the task team down the stairs while I scooped up the protector. A canister bounced in front of me and exploded with light, blinding me yet again, but despite my white vision, I dragged Baelen along and stumbled toward the exit. The brickwork scratched my body, and the protector’s body, as I felt my way to the door.

I pushed Baelen ahead and slammed the door behind us just as another flash happened. I paused, panting and blinking, trying to get my vision back. As soon as the whiteness gave way to the sight of the darkened hallway, I glanced at Baelen since he was so silent and still.

He stared at the protector’s body in my arms, completely unaware of me or where we were.

“Baelen?” I asked, nudging him, but his gaze didn’t shift to meet mine, and he didn’t reply. My heart lurched as another bang echoed from outside, and without preamble, I threw him over my other shoulder and hurried down the stairs.

Elizabeth and the team leaders were packing their equipment and other goods into large bags and boxes. Through the windows, sparks of magic flared in colorful flashes, and the sound of howls, screams, and shots made it clear where the rest of the task team were.

Arabella searched for something in a bag and, without glancing up, called out, “Zaide, Daithi, Baelen, we need a portal out of here now.”

Indignation rose at Arabella's inconsiderate order, but I gritted my teeth and shook my head as I lowered Baelen down and placed him against a wall. "Not possible. We are all drained from creating portals earlier. Don't you have vehicles?"

She paused and looked over at me. "We'd have to battle our way out and risk being tracked by the hunters."

It's the hunters attacking us? How did they find us again so quickly?

"Your teams are not as powerless as we are. If I remember correctly, Charlie told you this was a possibility when you asked us to portal everyone away." I placed Sigurd's body on a table, ignoring her scowl, and continued, "We can't further risk ourselves, especially if Clawdia and Charlie need our help."

Isaac stroked Arabella's arm, calming her. "We'll get past the hunters. Maybe we can tag them and see where they go?"

Robert let out a laugh as he passed with a box. "Good idea. I'll get the tags."

They continued to gather their equipment quickly with the focus and calm that comes from having done it many times before, despite the sounds of battle from outside. But I was not calm or focused. Smoke hung in the air, stinging my nostrils, and I tapped my foot as I stared at Baelen and counted his blinks.

He still hadn't looked away from Sigurd or spoken.

Is he still attempting to heal Sigurd? If he believed the protector couldn't be saved, wouldn't he have stopped by now? If I interrupt him, do I risk ruining his efforts?

The doors from the stairs burst open, and a member of the task team, a male with tiny horns on his head, ran inside, panting.

"We need to leave now. They're trying to sabotage our cars, and many of us are too injured to continue fighting them off."

"Get the injured in the cars and head to Safe House C. We'll be right behind you," Robert told the demon-kin and exchanged glances with the other team leaders, including Omaira, who descended from upstairs laden with bags. "Let's go."

Isaac turned into a giant wolf, startling me as a button from his shirt hit my head, and raced outside. The hunter's screams quietened as the door closed behind him.

“Bring the body with us. We need them to think he’s still alive,” Arabella called as she handed heavy bags over to Daithi and Savida. “We’re going to run to the cars now.”

We’re leaving…but Charlie and Clawdia could come back. They won’t know what happened to us.

I tried to reach out to Clawdia to tell her what was happening, but our bond was dull, as though she were asleep.

How else can I tell them? Does Charlie have his phone? No, dragons don’t have phones.

Phone.

I raced to our shared room and picked up the bag of our meager belongings, which held Charlie’s phone. I did one last look around for anything essential before hurrying back to pick up Sigurd and grip Baelen’s wrist.

Despite holding the protector’s cooling body making me feel more ill by the moment, I tightened my grip as I chased after the last of the team leaving the building.

The overpowering metallic scent of blood stopped me in my tracks, and bile rose in my throat at the sight of bodies littering the ground in pools of red. The smell seemed to shock my mate back to his senses, and his fangs dropped with a sharp hiss.

“If you’re hungry, vampire, dig in,” Danica called to Baelen as her eyes flickered to a dark red and her tiny fangs dropped. She grabbed an injured hunter from the ground, one who was reaching for his gun, and bit into him with the swiftness of a serpent striking prey.

I swallowed thickly and looked at my soul mate. The portal creations weakened him before the attack, and he’d spent more power trying to heal the protector. His eyes were a swirling pool of reds as he looked at me. For permission? I wasn’t sure. I saw the hunger there but knew I couldn’t watch him feed like an animal. It brought back too many old memories. Too many fears.

One moment, he was next to me, and the next, he was gone. My hand clenched around air, and I searched for him but saw nothing.

Above the screams and chaos, I heard, “Get into the vehicle, Zaide!”

I turned at the sound of my name and spotted Daithi and Savida waving me toward the large black car with the door open while two hunters fought against an illusioned version of them. A wolf shifter, presumably Isaac, did

the real job of pouncing on the males and tearing into their throats with a viciousness which surprised me.

Many of the dead hunters were only recognizable by the bow-and-arrow emblem on their black clothing. Others were still fighting, refusing to give up despite obvious injuries.

I hurried into the vehicle, placing the protector's body on a seat next to me and watching as the wolf shifted with the sound of snapping bones into a naked Isaac. He opened the passenger door and threw himself inside while shouting, "Bella! Alcor! Time to haul ass!"

Arabella appeared in the driver's seat like magic, and Alcor soon got into the back with Savida and Daithi.

"Wait, where's Baelen?" I asked as Arabella started the engine. "Baelen!"

Outside the car, blood and bodies littered the ground, and the screaming stopped so suddenly that the following silence made my hair stand on end. Baelen was nowhere to be seen, and the other cars were already driving away.

Is he in another car? Why would he leave me?

The car door slammed shut, and Baelen appeared in the seat next to me in a blink. The relief I felt at the sight of him made me close my eyes for a moment and thank the gods. He's used the invisibility ring to hide himself from me while feeding. The kind gesture made me feel grateful but also disgusted with myself.

He shouldn't have to hide his nature from me. I should be able to see him feed without fear.

Arabella wasted no time in driving us away and following the others in a convoy speeding down the dark roads.

"Are you all right now?" I asked Baelen quietly.

He sighed and nodded.

At his obvious disappointment, I continued, hoping to reassure him, "There was nothing else you could have done. You tried your best, and the man was already dead before you could help him. Bringing him back would have required a miracle."

Arabella heard my comment and asked, "Is he really dead? There's nothing we can do?"

Alcor said blandly, "Not unless you have demon fire to sacrifice in a dark magic spell to raise him from the dead." Everyone stiffened and peered

at the demon, but he only stared back with the blank expression he'd worn since he lost his memories. "I was not suggesting we actually try that."

Isaac let out a strained laugh and replied, "Of course not, bud. Good one."

"You must be new to making jokes," Daithi added as he scowled.

But there was something in Alcor's eyes that made me question exactly how much he'd forgotten.

Baelen spoke, distracting me from the demon. "Leave the male to his eternal rest. He deserves it."

Savida reached over the seat to pat Baelen's shoulder. "I'm sorry we couldn't save him."

"As am I." Baelen said in a toneless voice, his red eyes dull.

My eyebrows drew together in a frown. *He wasn't connected to the protector at all and hardly knew him, so why is he so distraught over his death?*

Arabella's voice was like a needle bursting a bubble around us. "Then the portals are open. Soon, otherworlders will steal our people again, and all the realms will be in danger from Fafnir."

Daithi replied with a sudden twinkle in his eyes, "We need to warn the realms that Fafnir is a potential threat to them. Many won't be guarding against portals. And those that do will be in even more danger."

"What do you mean?" Isaac asked.

"Realms like Alfheimr have their own magic to ensure portals are created only in the center of large towns, whereupon the strangers can be investigated by the local authorities and given approval to travel. But if they are unaware of Fafnir's power, he could devastate the entire town. We must warn them."

I rolled my eyes. From the very beginning, Daithi wanted to leave the human realm to Fafnir's devastation and escape to another realm, so it was not surprising that he was setting himself up with the honorable job of leaving and warning the others.

Arabella shook her head as she stopped at a red light. "I don't think it's immediately necessary. No one knows he is dead, so Fafnir won't be looking to create a portal yet."

"Fafnir might not, but all the otherworlders who have been attempting to travel will now be able to travel once more," I replied darkly. "Humans and supernaturals will go missing again."

“We’ll need to talk to the council about how we deal with that.”

I glanced at the corpse next to me and, for the first time, allowed myself to feel sorry for the protector, Sigurd, the legendary hero whose life was forever warped by duty. He lived as a hero, and even death couldn’t stop him from being called upon again and again.

“What about the protector?” I asked.

“What about him?”

“We should bury him. We should bury him where his family buried him and give him the honor of a fallen warrior.”

Arabella met my eyes in the mirror. “You’re right.” She turned to Isaac, “Contact the others. There’s no sign we are being followed, so we should make time to honor our fallen hero.”

* * *

OUR CONVOY PARKED in a spot that was burned into my memory like a brand. The exact place where Mary killed Winnie and I almost lost my soul pair. Where I was transported to meet my gods in Tartarus, a place I hadn’t seen since my capture. And where Charlie saved Clawdia by becoming her witch.

As I stepped out of the car, I could almost see specks of blood in the shadows of the gravel. I swallowed thickly and caught Daithi’s green eyes. He nodded once, a show of understanding, and my shoulders relaxed ever so slightly. Daithi didn’t see Clawdia’s death, but he did almost lose Savida to the witches’ ceremony to raise Sigurd.

I gripped my prayer stone and sent a thought to my gods, thanking them for saving Clawdia that day and asking them to look after her now until we could be reunited.

Baelen assisted me as I pulled the protector from the car, and we all moved in a slow procession to the grave where his children had laid him.

The witches of the task team, although injured and drained, dug up the grave with their magic, piling the mud neatly at the side until the hole was deep enough to reach the remnants of the wooden burial box.

I lowered him into the hole, and the witches muttered something. A chant or prayer, I couldn’t say, but as they began pouring the mud back into the hole, Elizabeth said, “Thank you, Sigurd. You were called upon to

defend the realm from invasive portals, and time and time again, you answered that call despite the pain and misery it caused you. Your sacrifice and commitment to your duty made the realm a safer place, and you did your best to defeat Fafnir. You won't be called upon again, so please rest in eternal peace."

We stood for a moment in the darkness, the lights from the cars too distant to reach us in this hidden grove, and listened to the sounds of the woodland.

"He really won't be called again?" I asked quietly.

"We found the documents that stated his soul will be released back to the realms when given permission."

I nodded my relief. What the witches called duty, I called eternal slavery, and as a former slave, I couldn't imagine a worse fate than not escaping servitude, even in death. I was grateful he was finally free.

Cold washed over me as a sudden wind blew, and I closed my eyes as my skin pebbled.

A loud crash startled us, and as metal crunched and screamed, the small teams of shifters, vampires, and demon-kin, as well as Robert and Danica, ran toward the cars and immediately called back to the other leaders, "Hunters! They've found us."

CHAPTER 2

BAELEN

How are these humans finding us? And with all the chaos we caused, how have they regrouped so quickly? For what purpose?

Having created many portals and fought a dragon, we were the most depleted of energy and therefore waited for instructions from the leaders on how and when to intervene.

But the sounds of battle made me twitchy. I was not the type to sit and wait. I ensured my enemy died, even if I endangered myself to do it, but I couldn't take such risks anymore, not when three other souls lived or died by my actions.

When another explosion shook the trees and lit the night's sky with fire, I exchanged a glance with my soul mate. His golden hands and jaw clenched, and I knew he was also ready to act. We moved as one and jogged back toward the cars. The small team of witches, Arabella, Alcor, Isaac, Daithi, Savida, and Elizabeth followed close behind.

Shards of bark hit my face, and I stopped in my tracks. What—?

My ears caught the faint whistle of something slicing through the air, but my eyes couldn't catch it. I flinched when it hit the tree only inches from my face. I turned to see a small projectile buried so deep into the trunk I could barely see it. Only the smell of smoke and the small hole proved it ever existed.

These weren't the same weapons used against us when the hunters came to capture supernaturals from the island. No, these weapons would kill.

As I heard another whistle, I moved instinctively, pushing Zaide out of the way and behind another, larger tree, pressing him against it in the hope I

could shield his giant frame from harm. His arms came around me as the surrounding trees and bushes rippled from the small projectiles spraying the landscape.

Peeking behind me, I noted our companions had also taken cover from the danger. If I looked with my titan power, I could see the blood threads of their bodies hiding, as we were, behind trees and bushes. Between the spray of bullets, I could hear the mutterings of plans forming. Fighting against such weapons was their expertise.

I peered around the tree, and my soul mate, only to attract another spray, the loud sound making my ears ring. Zaide's hands tightened around me as he pulled me firmly against his chest and glared.

"Patience," he whispered.

My eyebrow raised. *Does he have a plan?*

Instead of another spray, a strange clicking noise sounded, and Zaide grabbed me as we stormed out from the trees and toward the hunters. From behind us, others roared as they charged with us.

The heat of flames warmed my skin as we battled our way in the direction of the vehicles, and the light burned like a sigil on the road, beckoning us closer.

"This place is cursed," Zaide whispered.

A hunter threw his weapon to the ground and looked up at us. His eyes were the only thing visible, and his hatred for us seemed to burn inside them. He charged at us with a yell, and Zaide, with a single punch, stopped him in his tracks.

"Are you still hungry?" he asked, and I looked balefully at the unconscious human.

"They don't taste like sunlight."

"They will increase your strength. You still seem off."

I knew I caused him concern after I'd attempted to revive the protector. He didn't understand why it caused me to lose myself, and neither did I, but having feasted on the blood of the humans earlier, I was feeling much improved.

I'll explain once we are safe…

The rest of the group chased the hunters to retreat to their own vehicles and drove off.

"They'll be back as soon as they've regrouped. Status report, quickly!" Danica, the vampire task team leader, shouted.

“They’ve destroyed two of our cars,” Robert, the demon-kin leader, called out. “We’ll need another way out of here.”

“The tech?” Isaac asked.

“In the last car.”

Isaac let out a sigh of relief.

Robert added, “My team needs to get to safety. They’ve taken a big hit. So have the shifters.”

“All teams leave. Robert and Danica will lead in our stead. We’ll distract the hunters enough for you to get away.” Arabella announced, deciding for everyone and then addressed her witches. “Take a car, lead them on a chase until you are certain they’ve lost you, and head to the safe house.”

Isaac added, “Check the cars for bugs when you stop. They are following us somehow.”

In a flurry of movement, the teams did as instructed, and within seconds, the doors of the cars slammed closed, the headlights lit up the forest, and some cars pulled off and raced away.

“You guys will be okay?” Robert asked, his body half in the driver’s seat of the car. His gaze wandered over to Elizabeth.

“I’m fine. I will see my son when he returns.”

I raised my eyebrow at her words but said nothing. A squeal of tires made everyone jump to attention. The hunters’ cars headed straight toward us.

As we darted toward the trees to avoid the car, I shouted, “I have the strength to make a portal, but I have nowhere safe in the human realm, other than the shadow portal, to take us to.”

I caught Daithi’s eye. He held out his hand, and a glowing blue swirl appeared in front of us, growing larger by the second. But not fast enough. I threw my own power at it, urging it to complete. With Arabella, Isaac, Elizabeth, Alcor following behind us, we rushed through the portal just as the car engine screamed toward us, hitting a tree. The portal closed behind us with a bloom of leaves that scattered over the surroundings of … a home?

“Where are we?” I asked quietly. Despite the darkness, I could clearly see the furniture and decorations of a lived-in dwelling. I glanced at the stairs to see whether someone would rush down to protect their home from invaders.

My soul mate looked down at me, his scars illuminating the room, and replied, “Charlie’s home.”

Zaide told the leaders, “The home next door was Clawdia’s first witch’s. Winnie has passed on, but I’m uncertain if the authorities know. It may be a more comfortable place for you to stay as we won’t all fit here.”

Arabella nodded. “Ah. Good idea. I’ll head over and look around.”

Alcor and Isaac followed her automatically, and I stifled a chuckle at their predicament. Alcor with no memory of what the witch did to him, and Isaac pretending not to be in love with her to spare the demon’s feelings.

It was a mess of complicated emotion I’d gleaned through the tension between them and the things unsaid. I was sure it would work itself out once everything settled down.

“It feels strange to be back here.” Savida said quietly as he bounced on the cushion of the sofa. “Especially without Charlie and his furry companion.”

“If you are uncomfortable—” Daithi hovered protectively over his lover with a scowl on his face. If his lover weren’t a giant, winged demon, it might have looked sweet, but instead, Savida simply shook his head.

“I’m well, beloved.” He looked around with a smile. “This house holds memories of joy, not fear.”

Zaide patted his shoulder. “You are strong, Savida.”

“If you change your mind, we can get the witches to place us in other accommodations,” Daithi whispered.

“Why would Savida be afraid of Charlie’s home?” I asked Zaide quietly.

“Clawdia’s witch took his fire in the garden next door.”

I nodded my understanding.

“Forgive me for not explaining sooner. It’s hard to remember a time when you weren’t here with us.”

His sweet words and tender smile made my stomach flip and heat rise into my cheeks.

Elizabeth stood next to me, tears glistening in her eyes as she surveyed her son’s home. “There are no pictures,” she muttered.

“There is a picture! On his desk.” Savida cheered and dragged her along to the office, his wings flapping with excitement.

With nothing else to do for the moment, I followed them into the room featuring a desk and computer with a sofa along the wall.

“See,” Savida said as he picked up a framed image and presented it to Elizabeth. “It’s him and Clawdia.”

I peered over her shoulder to see the image of them was with her as a cat lying on his chest, and a laugh escaped me. I’d never considered that he spent years with Clawdia before he knew she wasn’t just a cat. I knew how much Clawdia probably enjoyed having the upper hand and tormenting Charlie with her catlike behavior.

Elizabeth continued staring as she gripped the frame. “He’s been alone.”

“Charlie?” Savida continued without waiting for a response. “We noticed he was lonely until we arrived, but we adopted him as a brother for Zaide, which has worked out well. They already share as though they’ve done it their whole life.”

I covered a smirk as Zaide rolled his eyes. “You are hilarious, demon.”

“Why does it surprise you he was alone? He told you of his situation, correct?” I asked.

“It’s different to see it,” she replied quietly, her eyes still glued to the photo.

“Charlie has worked hard to live well despite his circumstances. Don’t mourn his life. He wouldn’t thank you for it. Instead, be proud he survived and thrived even without the support of a family,” Zaide told her firmly, and something flashed across her face. An emotion too quick to catch.

From my own fractured relationship with my parents, I knew Zaide was right. Charlie wouldn’t want her sympathy nor her support, having been without it for so long, just as I wouldn’t want that from my mother.

But I had known my mother. I was her ally, her student, her companion, and despite my fury that she’d left me, I missed her. I wouldn’t want her to come back treating me like the child I had been when she left, but I did want a relationship with her. I imagined Charlie wanted a similar thing with his birth mother.

Elizabeth eyed us. “I’m glad he has a family now.”

The front door opened with a creek, and soon, Arabella and Isaac crowded into the office space too.

Arabella turned to Zaide. “The house is untouched, and no one has been there since you left. We should be safe there for the night until we can figure out our next move.”

Elizabeth put the frame down and strode from the room without a word to anyone while Isaac wandered wide-eyed around the desk with twitching

fingers. “This setup is—”

He was interrupted as Arabella said, “Come on, Isaac. Let’s get some rest.” She turned back to Zaide. “We’ll be over in the morning.” She checked her watch. “Which isn’t far away.”

As they left and goodbyes were exchanged, I noticed another image flat on the desk and picked it up. It didn’t have the color of the framed picture, and the clothing worn by the people didn’t resemble what I’d witnessed the humans wearing.

“That little girl is Clawdia.” Zadie told me in a low voice. I re-examined the image, looking deeply into the colorless eyes of my love. Although she was a child, her small smile caused a bubble of affection to warm me.

Her bond glowed in my center, so I knew she was alive, but I couldn’t feel her emotions. Not because she had shut us out like before, but because they were dulled … as though she was asleep.

“Where are you, Sunlight?” I called through our bond, but it didn’t seem to rouse her.

Once we get to bed, I’ll reach out to her in the dreamscape and make sure they are safe.

My anger at her recklessness didn’t stop me from worrying about her.

Zaide’s finger drew my attention back to the picture as he pointed at the people behind her. “The adults are her parents. They abused her and later sold her to Fafnir. Knowing what I know now, it’s understandable that she couldn’t stand to look at the image.”

My gaze flicked over them. Fury enveloped me, and my fangs dropped.

They hurt her, caused her so much suffering she preferred death. She preferred her familiar form.

But if things hadn’t unfolded as they had, I would never have met her, and if I had, I wouldn’t have realized what she was to me.

If things hadn’t unfolded as they had … and what were the chances of that?

The thought niggled at me.

“Where did this picture come from? Did Charlie find this?” I asked as I waved it.

Zaide shook his head. “It’s the vision Daithi had of her, which led us to look for her here. Charlie used the building in the background to date it.”

“We thought Margaret would be a tiny, shriveled, old female. Instead, she was a cat.” Savida chuckled at the memory.

My heart raced as I turned to Daithi. “The vision. Have you ever seen something from the past before?”

He frowned and hesitated before replying. “No. It was very different from what I’d seen before. That’s why I was so certain she really was Zaide’s soul pair.”

“And what exactly made you believe that?”

“There was a voice. It said ‘Margaret’ and ‘Zaide.’”

“Was it a female voice?” I asked.

Could it be…?

“Where are you going with this?” Zaide asked quietly, but I ignored him, my gaze fixed on Daithi.

Daithi nodded once. “It was a female voice.”

“But not Clawdia’s?”

“No.”

I knew it…

“You think it might have been your mother?” Zaide asked, following my train of thought.

I nodded. “Yes. And I think she gave you the vision in the dreamscape. Especially because you’ve never seen the past before.”

Of course my mother had orchestrated the entire event. She’s not supposed to get involved, but she’s used her power to manipulate my future before. But why? And how? It shouldn’t be possible.

Many times since my mother left, I’d longed to see her, to ask her questions. It was just another in a long list of previous events. I sighed and rubbed my head as I leaned against the desk.

Daithi seemed distressed to hear my theory when I thought it was good news. “If the vision was given to me by another seer, then…”

“Everything I told you is still true.” Zaide replied, but I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“You have still controlled the visions.” Savida stroked the arm of his love soothingly.

My brow furrowed, but I pushed on. “If my mother gave you the vision, then it means your power has not changed.”

“You mean my curse has not deteriorated?”

I said nothing in reply. Daithi and I had similar minds about visions, I saw the effects they had on my parents, on me, and he lived through the torment of knowing too much. It was a curse.

He nodded somberly before turning his green eyes to Savida. “It’s time for bed. Come along, beloved.”

Savida hesitated, his eyes flicking to Zaide and me. “What about Clawdia and Charlie? Shouldn’t we find them before we rest? They may still be in danger from the dragon.”

Daithi took his demon by the hand and tugged as he replied, “We are no use to them tired. We will find them in the morning.” But Savida didn’t move. His wings twitched, and he stared at us.

I smiled softly. “They are alive, and Clawdia seems to be asleep. We will try to contact them and get them here in the morning.”

“They are safe?” Savida asked, his brow furrowed with worry.

“From what we can tell. We wouldn’t be here if they weren’t,” Zaide told him, but his hand twitched. He was as worried about them as I was. But there was nothing we could do for them while we were so drained and Clawdia was asleep.

Savida didn’t notice Zaide’s tell. I was coming to know my soul mate more than his oldest friend and warmth bloomed in my center with a kind of smugness.

“I look forward to seeing them in the morning.” He smiled brightly, nodded his head, and then fluttered out of the office, pulling Daithi along with him. When the door upstairs shut and all we could hear was the quiet rustling as they readied themselves for sleep, I sighed.

“Charlie’s room is upstairs. I—we—It’s not a large bed; however, we could—but if you don’t want to, I could sleep on the floor as I did before, or perhaps you’d rather sleep here.” He waved his hands toward the sofa bed, a blush turning his skin rose gold.

I reached for his hand and squeezed. “Where would you like me?”

He swallowed thickly, his pupils dilated, and I hid a smile at his reaction. “I’d feel better if you were close.”

His smile was soft, and his shoulders relaxed. “Then let’s go to bed.”

With his hand resting on my back, he guided me up the stairs into a bedroom and closed the door behind us. I wasted no time undressing as the weariness set into my bones.

Zaide frowned from the end of the bed as he watched me throw back the sheets and crawl into bed. “Are you well?”

I closed my eyes as I replied quietly, “I’m tired. I’m worried for Charlie and Clawdia and don’t like that I failed to revive the protector. Our lives

will be much more difficult now.”

I listened to the sound of Zaide shucking his clothes and the squeak of the mattress as he joined me. “Clawdia and Charlie will be fine. We will find them soon. As for the protector, you did your best. Attempting to defy the laws of nature would not be easy. You were trying so hard to hold on to him even though it pained you, even though your power wasn’t cooperating, even though you were in danger. It was—”

When he stopped, I opened my eyes and leaned over so I hovered above him. “Go on.”

He hesitated, his scars glowing in the darkness and offering a purple tinge to his nervous expression. “I was concerned. I’ve never seen you like that. It was as though you weren’t aware of the danger; you were so focused. Absent.”

I could read what he meant by the words. “You believed me to be possessed again.”

“I didn’t know what to think. It was … disturbing,” he confessed in a whisper.

I sighed and stroked his cheek, brushing the glowing scar under his eye. “I’m sorry I worried you. I was focused on my role to save the protector at any cost, and although I knew there was danger, I also knew you would protect me. You did.”

His cheek warmed under my touch, but his brow furrowed. “The protector meant nothing to you, so why were you determined to save him at the cost of your life? Our life? Is that not what you are frustrated with Clawdia for?”

I sighed and rolled onto my back and closed my eyes again. “He means nothing to me, but he meant something to them and to you and Clawdia. I will always try to please you if I am able. I’m often frustrated with Clawdia because she rushes into danger without communicating. She doesn’t have faith in us to keep her safe, but I had faith in your ability to keep me safe, which is different.” From the corner of my eye, I could see him thinking about that, so I continued, “The most frustrating part is that I’m sure I could have revived the protector, but my power just felt so weak. My control over blood is unparalleled, but it didn’t work. I worry my power was otherwise occupied.”

Zaide rolled to his side and frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, Clawdia asked me how to use my power only moments before a dragon attacked and she flew off with Charlie. You don’t think that is suspicious?”

“She couldn’t have known that—”

I raised my eyebrow, which silenced him. “She was acting strangely. Pale, shaken, ill. She wanted you and me to get some rest, which left her and Charlie on the roof. She knew something.”

“You think your mother showed her something in a dream?”

“I do. It’s happened before. Mother has visited her many times, shown her things. If something terrible were going to happen, if I were going to die, maybe my mother would show Clawdia and tell her how to change the outcome.”

His lips twisted. “It would explain her behavior.”

The sun was rising in the sky outside. Its rays peered through the gaps in the curtains, and I closed my eyes wearily. “We will not solve it tonight, but don’t be surprised if I organize another punishment session when we find them.”

Zaide chuckled. “I don’t think she thinks it’s much of a punishment to be touched by her men.”

I must have drifted off, because when I heard her voice in my mind, I jolted upright and noted the sun was far higher than before.

“Baelen, Zaide? Where are you?”

CHAPTER 3

CLAWDIA

Gasping, I woke up to Charlie's familiar brown eyes, and he startled as I lurched out of his arms to my feet, adrenaline buzzing through my body.

"Clawdicat, thank God you're awake." His deep sigh of relief was louder than the movement he made standing.

I blinked, trying to clear the blurriness from my sight, and slurred, "What have I missed?"

The woodland was still and quiet. Not even the birds dared to chirp as the corpse of the dragon lay motionless in the crater next to us.

Flashes of my vision made me shudder. The lingering cold in my limbs felt like needles prodding under my skin.

"You killed the dragon with Baelen's blood power, and then you passed out. What happened?" He stroked my goose-pimpled arms and tried to pull me into a hug, but I was still too twitchy for comfort and pulled away. I felt like I'd been electrocuted, and Fafnir's voice echoed in my mind.

"I'll cut her neck as I take what I couldn't before, and I'll be the last thing she sees before she dies. This time, she won't escape."

He's furious. He's going to make sure we suffer the consequences. But as I stared at the green scales of the dragon glittering under the moonlight, I couldn't help a tiny smirk. We'd hurt him. Finally.

I'd taken too long to answer, because Charlie asked, "Clawdicat, are you all right?"

I refocused on his face, his brows drawn down with concern. He was naked, his pale skin pebbled from the cold, and streaks of blood covered his

shoulders and arms. I gasped.

“Charlie, you’re bleeding.” I rushed to him, my hands hovering over the injuries, and before he could open his mouth, I reached for his threads and turned them back to a healthy green. The dried blood remained, but the cuts he’d suffered from the dragon’s claws healed.

He growled at me and grabbed my hands. “I told you not to.”

“That was ages ago, and I can’t let you stay injured when I could easily heal you.” I waved him off and tried to hide the sudden dizziness blurring my vision.

“You just fainted. You can’t use your powers when you’re hurt.”

He cupped my neck, and I covered his hands, staring into his brown eyes, and using them as an anchor. I took a deep breath and assured him in a whisper, “I’m fine.”

“So why the fainting?” he asked, and his gaze searched for the secrets I held on the tip of my tongue.

He once told me he could tell Lydia was keeping secrets from him and that was why he didn’t think he could love her. Charlie’s gift for finding things, especially the truth, had always amazed me, but now I feared he would lose the trust in me if he knew I was lying.

But I can’t tell him. He can’t know about the visions yet.

I needed to speak to Nisha before I told them all so I could make them understand why I had to lie and mislead them. I didn’t want to lose them like Nisha lost her mates. Warning them about Fafnir’s revenge and telling them the dragon we just killed was Fafnir’s separated drakorian soul could wait until I had a plan to ensure it would all work out.

They are going to be so angry with me for keeping this all to myself when I promised I wouldn’t.

They would never hurt me, but the weight of their future disappointment and fear sat heavily on my shoulders.

As though I could stop him from seeing everything written on my face or in my eyes, I looked away and squeezed his hands.

“I’m not sure why I fainted. Maybe I was just doing too much with Baelen’s power, but I promise I’m fine.” I forced a smile and asked, “We need to get back to the others. Can you fly?”

“Yeah, maybe.” He blinked, and the confusion in his gaze pinched at my heart.

I whispered, “Let’s go.”

“Are you sure?”

I raised an eyebrow, unsure why he was hesitating. “Do you want to stay here in the dark forest with a dead dragon?”

“Fuck no.” He glared at the corpse. “We could celebrate the end of Fafnir if only we knew this dragon was actually him and not the clone.”

I swallowed hard against the guilt. “We can celebrate with the others. Besides, one less dragon attacking people is a good thing.”

“Yeah, but it would be nice to know if you got your revenge. After all he did to you, he deserves it. Pity he didn’t turn back so we could know either way.”

“Revenge...” I repeated slowly.

Revenge was an ugly term. I didn’t want revenge as much as I wanted vengeance. I didn’t want to kill Mary, but I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to feel the fear Winnie and I felt. I wanted karma.

And I wanted the same thing for Fafnir. I wanted all the hurt he’d caused to be multiplied and given back to him. But I didn’t want to dirty my soul with any more terrible things. Especially not for him.

Despite how much I empathized with his plight as a child, he’d started anew in a time when no one knew him, and instead of changing, he dedicated it to murder, stealing magic, and organizing the hunters to continue his agenda. And now I’d seen him promise revenge against me personally.

“You probably weren’t even thinking about that, were you? My Clawdicat is sweet to everyone but me.” He kissed my forehead, but I couldn’t bring myself to enjoy it or respond. Charlie continued, “But shouldn’t we bury it or something? What if humans find it? Or the hunters?”

“We can send the task team out to do something for it. We can’t bury a dragon with our bare hands.”

“True.” His eyes unfocused, and I knew he was talking to Dralie, his dragon.

When he moved back a few paces, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the hot gust that came from his transformation and warmed my frozen body. Before I could open my eyes, he scooped me up in his claws, and I gasped as we took off into the sky.

Without the adrenaline of my vision and the dragon chase, I could focus more on the ride. I felt safer in his claws than on his back. Since we weren’t

looking for a dragon ready to attack at any moment, Charlie and Dralie didn't need their claws for anything but carrying me. Gliding above the tree line, I could peer through their claws and see the stars bright and twinkling above us. It was a lovely view.

Yet, with each beat of Dralie's wings the frigid night air and wind chilled my bones to the core until my teeth chattered, and I trembled. *Dragon travel is cold.*

When Dralie wing's faltered, my heart skipped a beat.

I pressed closer to the cool scales of their dragon chest as we descended through the trees toward a small wooden building. When we landed, I slipped from their claws onto unsteady feet and hurried toward the front door without waiting for Charlie.

The door was locked, of course, but I knocked. Banging my numb hands against the wood made me wince and I shivered as I waited for a response.

I called out, "Hello, is anyone there?"

"What are you doing?" Charlie hissed as he rushed over after shifting.

"Checking if someone is here. It would be rude to just barge in."

He rolled his eyes and nudged me out of the way. "Move and let the master work."

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He grimaced and heaved a potted plant up next to the door. Although there wasn't a key underneath, there was a hairpin. It was good to know his finding powers hadn't disappeared when Dralie appeared.

"We couldn't make it back to the office block," Charlie said in explanation for the early descent, "but Dralie says this cabin smells empty. It should be safe for us to rest for a bit."

Guilt pinched my heart. "Whatever you think is best. I'm sorry if I pushed you to fly too soon."

He shrugged and began picking the lock with the hairpin. "We're still dealing with whatever that dragon tried to do to our head. We'll be fine after a bit of rest."

But I couldn't wait for him to play with the lock and eventually get us in. I was too cold and tired. I shifted and scrambled out from underneath my clothing to jump onto the banister of the porch.

Charlie didn't notice me jumping onto the roof and diving down the chimney, but when the door swung open and Charlie came in to find me on

the sofa and licking my fur clean of soot, he glared.

“You’ve no patience, Clawdicat. Look at the mess you’ve made.” My gaze followed his finger to the pile of soot at the bottom of the chimney and the pawprints to the sofa.

I continued licking my paw. *“I was cold.”*

His eyes narrowed on me. “You could have been a cat when we were flying.”

The thought hadn’t occurred to me, but I didn’t want to admit that. I turned human and shrugged. “But then I could have fallen out of your claws because I’m small.”

He grumbled as he headed to the bathroom, and I admired the view of his thighs and calves.

He turned around and began, “Are you coming—” but he covered his private parts with his hands when he noticed me looking and glared. “You can’t judge me for the shrinkage. You know it doesn’t look like this all the time.”

A surprised laugh bubbled up and out from me, and I relaxed as pure adoration washed over me. For a moment, I forgot about the danger we’d just faced. I forgot about the vision, the secrets I was keeping from him, and the fact we were in a stranger’s cabin in the woods. I simply relaxed into the pure warmth radiating from my heart.

“I love you,” I told him.

His eyes darkened. “Come and love me as we get washed up.”

I can’t turn down an invitation like that.

Pushing myself off the sofa, I walked over to him, swaying my hips as his gaze prompted a lustful heat to burn where his eyes touched. I passed him, and he spanked me, the smack reverberating loudly in the small cabin. I gasped and shot him a glare before pushing the bathroom door open. He smiled unrepentantly.

The bathroom had a small glass shower cubicle and a large bath by the window letting in so much moonlight it reflected off the white tub and white tiles to illuminate the room.

For a cabin in the middle of nowhere, the bathroom is amazing.

I glanced at the tub longingly, but we were both too filthy to bathe, so I started the shower and sighed as the warm water washed over me. Black streaks ran down the drain.

When Charlie’s cold body pressed against my back, I turned to push him out of my spray. He didn’t go far since the cubicle was so small. He simply swayed into the glass wall and bounced back to me, crowding me in a way that made me both nervous and excited.

But I wouldn’t let him see that. I pouted and turned back to the wall to grasp the bottle of soap in the niche. “Wait your turn.”

“Come on, Clawdia. I always wait my turn.” He nuzzled my neck, subtlety pushing me closer to the wall and walking himself further into the spray.

I turned, my nipples brushing his chest, my hands soapy and lathered with bubbles, ready to fight fire with fire. Starting at the cut above his pelvis, I moved my hands slowly over his stomach, abs, and pecs, and when my hands reached his shoulders, I stepped into him and the spray.

I whispered, “I recall you practically had me all to yourself last time.”

He growled deep in his throat as he leaned forward, reaching around me and tickling my ear with his lips as he said, “Not true. Your mouth sucked cocks when it could have been screaming my name.”

I swallowed. “Seems selfish to want my mouth too when you got everything else.”

I heard the cap of a bottle open behind me, and then his hands grasped my bum. I moaned as he lifted me up and pulled me against his hard cock. He pressed my back against the cold tiles and pinned me there with his body. The feel of him against my pussy made me clench wantonly, and I nibbled at his neck as I rolled my hips, rubbing myself against him.

He ignored my whines and trailed soapy fingertips slowly up my thigh to my stomach. “Does this feel selfish to you?”

I shook my head, my body straining for his touch, oversensitive yet burning for more. When his hand reached my breast, I gasped, and he swallowed it with a hard kiss. I clung to him, my nails scratching at his freshly healed shoulders.

I was on the cusp of begging for him to fuck me but he calmed, slowing our kiss, gentling his touch, and placed me back down under the spray.

His cock was upright, red and straining, so I knew he wanted me. I opened my mouth to ask what was going on when he smiled and said, “I’m so unselfish that I’ve run us a bath that’s probably overflowing by now. So, let’s soak for a bit. You look like you need it.”

I was both bemused at the turn of events and grateful for the gesture. Charlie couldn't be called a romantic man, but stopping us from going too far in the shower so we could appreciate the bath was sweet.

I hadn't had a bath since I was human a hundred years ago, and the longing to relax immersed in water was like a siren's call.

The bath was full and piled high with bubbles when I left the cubical and Charlie shut the taps off on the tub. He held my hand as I stepped into it and moaned as the warm water rose around my neck, wrapping around me like a blanket.

Charlie joined me but sat at the other end, only tucking his feet and legs on the outside of mine. I frowned. "You're far away."

He leaned back and smirked. "Neither of us is going to relax if you're pressed up against me."

I pursed my lips. "We can relax in lots of ways."

I could have relaxed a lot more had I gotten an orgasm out of our shower play. Instead, my body thrummed with want, and everything inside me wanted to reach for his hard cock hiding beneath the surface of bubbles.

He tilted his head as he considered me, and I smiled, taking deep breaths through my nose to try to cool my ardor.

What's the matter with me? I've never usually been so … needy.

Charlie leaned forward, causing a wave of water to rush toward me. He grasped my hand and pulled me so his face was only inches away and he could search my eyes. "Do you need to come to relax? You want my cock inside you? Is that what you need?"

I shivered, and goosebumps rose on my arms. His dirty talk always had the most ridiculous effect on me, and desire curled in my stomach, low and desperate.

"Please," I whispered, my lips grazing his.

"You saved my life today, so I suppose you should get a reward," he whispered back, not pressing his lips any closer to mine.

"I did save your life…" I nudged my head so my bottom lip stroked more firmly over his and suppressed a whine when he still didn't kiss me.

Tease. I cursed.

Then his arms swept my legs up and over his bent ones so I sat in his lap, his erection straining between us. The bubbles fizzled out as water covered them, and some clumps flew into the air with the swift movement, but I wasn't watching to see where they landed. My witch, my dragon mate,

cupped my chin and finally, *finally* kissed me until any heat that was lost in the transition from the shower to the bath was back with a vengeance.

My hands stroked his chest as our tongues tangled. His hands roamed over my back and chased away the chill. When I gripped his erection, he bit my lip and made a noise that set me on fire.

Like all our interactions, even when I was a cat and he human, we pushed and pulled, teased and played. For every action, there was an equal reaction.

So, of course, when he cupped my breasts, I squeezed his cock. When he pinched at my nipples, I clawed at his back. And when he nipped at my neck, I sucked on his earlobe.

His fingers brushed between the crease of my ass, inching toward my pussy, and I jolted. He chuckled darkly, and my breath caught when he pressed the two fingers inside me, sliding them deep.

“You’re so wet, baby, but I need you to fuck my fingers and get yourself ready for me.”

Encouraged by his dirty words, I moved, pressing myself closer and closer to his knuckles, desperate for as much as I could get from him. I lazily stroked his erection, sliding the soft skin through my grip and playing with the tip.

“That’s it. Good girl. God, this feels so fucking good.”

Those words. My body clenched around his fingers.

The erotism of his words, his lust-filled voice, and the scruff of his cheeks against my neck became too much for me. I was shaking and breathless and so ready to be pleasured out of my mind. I’d had enough of teasing.

CHAPTER 4

CLAWDIA

Before Charlie could stop me, I pulled off his fingers, rocked up on my knees, pressed his cock to my center, and sat down slowly, so as not to slosh water all over the floor. We moaned our relief.

The stretch of him filling me was a little more painful than usual, but that burn only made the pleasure brighter.

His head lolled back, and his eyes were half lidded as he cupped my breasts. But the bath and our position didn't give me the leverage I needed to reach our climax. I needed more. I needed the passion and fireworks and roughness. Thrusts, not grinding.

Charlie must have felt the same, because he pushed me up to my feet and pulled my hand to turn me around. "Hands and knees, Clawdicat."

I did as instructed, the cold air chilling my bum and back, which rose above the water, and backed into Charlie. He rubbed his hands over the globes of my bum, and I wiggled.

He spanked me, and I yelped and threw a look over my shoulder.

"What was that for? I thought you were rewarding me for saving your life."

"I couldn't help myself, sorry." He smiled and distracted me from my ire as he rubbed his cock over the seam of my pussy before he plunged deep. My hands clenched, and my mouth and nose dipped under the water as I leaned into the pleasure.

Then his finger started rubbing at my arsehole, and I clenched around him.

“When we were on the dock…” he started as he pushed his finger in a little more with each thrust in my pussy. “I played with your arse.”

“You did.” I didn’t need the reminder of such an incredible moment when I was already on the brink of orgasm, but I couldn’t stop the flashes of memory.

“Did you like it?”

“You know I did.” I wiggled again, forcing his fingers deeper inside me, and he kneaded at my cheek as he added another finger and stretched me wider, still keeping up with the steady thrusts driving me wild.

“And if I were to do something more than play?”

I paused for a moment, turning to look at him over my shoulder again. “I—I trust you, Charlie. I know whatever we do, I’ll have fun, because that’s how you’ve always made me feel.”

He bit his lip and spanked me again. “Don’t be sweet when I’m trying to fuck your arse.”

I laughed. “Sorry.”

He added another finger, and I shuddered as the stretch burned in a tingling way that made me reach for my clit. As his fingers thrust inside me, my own fingers brushed my folds, and my eyes rolled back in my head as tingles started in my lower back. He spanked me again.

“Did I say you could do that?” he asked but did not try to move my hand.

“You aren’t the boss of me,” I replied breathlessly.

“No, but I can tell on you to Baelen.”

I moved my hand further back to grasp his balls, and he made a choked moan before he pulled out and spanked me again. “You’re playing with fire.”

I chuckled. “You are a dragon.”

He notched his cock, not at my pussy but at my ass. “You want to try?”

“Please.” My toes wiggling with my excitement. After all the teasing and leisurely fucking, I was desperate to know what he felt like there, how I’d feel, especially since I wanted to take all my men at once someday.

Just the thought of all three of them filling me made me salivate.

He stroked himself against me using the wetness from my pussy to lube his cock. “Please, Charlie. You’re such a tease.”

When he slowly pushed inside me, I shuddered. It was a tight squeeze, and I struggled to take him, the pleasure boarding on pain. “Are you all

right?” He asked.

“I’m okay.” I licked my lips as my fantasies of group activities dissolved by the second.

“Okay isn’t good.” He reached underneath me to stroke my pussy in long, luxurious touches that wound me up even tighter. “Stop clenching for a second. Push out a little—”

I breathed out as he slid inside me so deep I thought I’d gag on him.

It was a strange sensation, but it felt wicked and so good that I could have melted. The moans coming from me were low, groaning, and wild as he fucked me.

“Your ass is so tight, Clawdia. I won’t last long.” He groaned and continued to talk nonsense. “Feels so good. You’re taking me so well. Meant for me. Perfect. Fuck.”

Our breaths became more ragged and uneven as we chased our pleasure, and I gasped as my orgasm struck me like lightning. I buried my head in the water to hide my scream, and when I resurfaced, I felt reborn.

I was tender and winced as he pulled out, but I sat back on my legs and leaned against him once he’d settled himself behind me again. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my cheek.

“That was incredible,” he sighed.

“Yeah.” It was all I could think to say, since half of my brain refused to function.

“What did you think of anal?” he asked as his fingertips trailed over my collarbone.

“It’s different, but so good.” I peeked up at him under my eyelashes and smiled. “I don’t think I could take Zaide there, though.”

He chuckled, and the vibrations shook me. “Maybe with lots of practice.”

The water was a lot colder than when we got in. The bubbles had disappeared, and a sleepy haze was coming over me, so I sat up, reached for soap, and cleaned up a little.

As I stood up to get a towel, Charlie spoke. “I just realized that I didn’t feel you.”

“You did more than feel me,” I replied easily and rubbed myself dry.

He gave me a look as he pulled the plug and also stood. “I mean, I couldn’t feel your pleasure like I normally can. You’re still blocking us?”

“I—I—” I wasn’t sure how to divert the question without looking like I was hiding something. “Was it bad? You weren’t pleased without feeling my pleasure?”

His mouth dropped open in shock, and he shook his head sharply. “No. God, no. Clawdicat, your arse is something else, and that was amazing.” He opened his mouth to continue but stopped and stared for a moment. Then his demeanor completely changed, and he laughed. “You know what? Maybe it’s a good thing. We should check our skills without getting swept up in the bond. I think I’ve still got it.”

“Nobody likes a gloater.” I raised my brow and used my towel to wipe him down.

“I thought that was a show-off.”

“Potayto, potahto.”

We found the bedroom and collapsed into bed. I yawned, suddenly exhausted, and wrapped myself into the thin gray blankets laid out on the wooden bed.

My damp hair was soaking the pillow underneath me, but I couldn’t bring myself to move or dry it. Zaide would have insisted. But Charlie and I were too tired to do anything but lie on the bed, each of us lost to our own thoughts in the postcoital bliss.

“Did you ever think we would end up like this?” I asked.

He let out a bark of laughter. “Did I think you would turn into a human and I’d fall head over tit in love with you? No. Not in a million years.”

“I suppose that is asking too much.” I chuckled. “I think I hoped we would end up together. Somehow. I wasn’t really looking at the details of how.”

“Did you envisage the soul pair and soul mate too? Or just me?” He wiggled his brows, and I nudged him as I laughed.

“They were a surprise. But a welcome one. I can’t imagine life without them now.”

He sighed happily and rubbed his stomach. “Me either.”

“Really?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“I don’t know. I just think I would be resentful if I had to share you. Any of you. No matter how nice the other ladies were. Maybe I’m selfish.”

“You’re a cat. That’s to be expected.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know. But you don’t have to worry about me being resentful. If anything, I’m encroaching on their bonds with you. If I didn’t want you so much, you’d be a throuple and I’d be dating a witch of mommy’s suggestion.”

“You aren’t encroaching on anything. My heart was yours first.”

He lolled his side to the side to look at me, and with soft eyes, he whispered, “I love you too.”

My smile was so wide it hurt my cheeks. I rolled onto my side and pressed a kiss to his chest. “Finally decided to say it back?”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me closer. He stroked my hair, moving a strand out of my eyes, and cupped my cheek. “I’ve got to keep you in some mystery.”

We were silent for a moment, and in that second, the fears and darkness I’d been pushing away closed in. A little voice whispered that I should enjoy this moment while it lasts. Soon, my secrets would poison everything I loved.

“Do you think you’ll always love me?” As soon as I said it, I knew it was a mistake, and I hurried to clarify so I didn’t sound completely crazy. I’m not sure how much I succeeded. “I’m sorry, I know you can’t see the future, and I don’t expect you to try, but if we ever lost our bond, like last time, or if I ever betrayed you or something terrible happened, would you still be with me? Would you still try?”

He frowned. “What’s got you asking this?”

“I’m just…” But I couldn’t give him an answer.

He took a moment to think, which only made me more anxious, before he whispered, “The future is unknown, Clawdia. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, let alone in the years to come. But you’re the first person I’ve ever loved, first cat I ever loved too. I can’t imagine a world where I don’t love you. So, do some meditation like Zaide taught you, empty your brain of those negative thoughts, and get some sleep.”

I nuzzled into him, nodding, and took a deep breath.

They will forgive me. They love me. I just need to talk to Nisha, make a plan, and then explain the curse.

It will be all right … won’t it?

* * *

I ARRIVED IN THE DREAMSCAPE, with a smile and a sigh of relief.

Usually, I dreaded seeing Nisha. Our sessions consisted of bad news, terrible visions and life altering revelations. But this time, I hoped she'd be able to give me some good news, something to ease the horrible anxiety squeezing my chest at the thought of my bonds' disappointment and fear at the development of this power. Or curse.

With all the pain it had caused me so far, I was leaning toward a curse.

"Ah, you're here. Good. Let's start with our first lesson," Nisha announced before I had time to turn and greet her.

"Lesson?" I watched her, confused, as she whirled around the cottage sitting room, pulling books from the shelf and littering the coffee table with them.

"Yes. We agreed we should start teaching you control over your visions so you don't become overwhelmed with them."

It wasn't an unwelcome suggestion. I was overwhelmed and wanted to learn how to control the visions, but I was certain we hadn't verbally discussed that yet. *Perhaps she saw it in a vision?*

I frowned. "When did we agree that?"

My question stopped her, and she tilted her head as she considered. "The last time we spoke?"

I shook my head slowly. "The last time we spoke, we were following Fafnir in visions of his past."

"We didn't talk about how to go forward with your developing powers?" She straightened, her brows drawn as she stared at me in confusion.

"No. I wanted to talk to you about that today. Did you see that?" She shook her head and then took a step back, lost her footing, and fell onto the sofa. She rubbed her head, and I rushed over, more alarmed than before. I perched on the edge of the coffee table in front of her and placed a hand on her knee.

"Are you all right?"

Only yesterday, she told me she was dying, and today, she's forgetful and dizzy. What does this mean? Is she dying sooner? I'm not ready for her to leave me with this curse, and Baelen will never forgive either of us if she passes before he can reunite with her.

While her dark skin hadn't paled, there was a shiny film on it I hadn't immediately noticed, but when I checked her threads, I couldn't see

anything wrong with her. She seemed healthy. But I couldn't relax. Nisha didn't reply. She sat rubbing her head like she was playing with clay, completely unaware of my hand on her knee. Unaware of me entirely.

I know because when she finally lowered her hands and looked up, she startled to see me. "Clawdia!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been here?"

Fear struck my veins as though my blood had turned to ice cold water, and I tensed to stop myself from shivering as I replied, "Not long."

She's dying. And it's happening fast.

Should I even be discussing visions with her if she's so sick?

CHAPTER 5

CLAWDIA

"Are you well, dear? You look like you've had a fright." She covered my hand with hers, and although her touch was cold and dry, she squeezed firmly.

I forced a smile. "I'm just worried about you."

"Worried about me?" She leaned back and waved a hand. "Why would you waste time with that? You have much more important things to be doing."

"I'm an excellent multitasker," I told her wryly as I stood. "Shall I make us some tea? I'll update you."

She beamed, her cheeks darkening with pleasure as she nodded.

Moving things in the dreamscape was still just as magical to me as it was when Baelen first introduced me to it.

I waved the teapot from the kitchenette over to the coffee table, and it moved in a slow bobbing motion as though it sailed on an invisible stream until it landed in the center of the table, pushing books out of the way. Curls of heat wafted from the pot within seconds, and the smell of a warm peppermint tea infused the room.

I created some teacups, ones that looked similar to the china cups my mother housed in a glass cabinet, and poured us some tea.

"I had a vision. The dragon attacked us while we were on the roof of the building we were hiding in. I saw my bonds and the task team leaders get hurt, and Sigurd died. I was on edge all evening after that. I stared at the horizon, looking for when the vision began because I thought if I was there, I could change it so everyone survived.

“But I didn’t see any other versions of the vision, and I didn’t see what would happen if I told my bonds, so I didn’t tell them in case it put them in danger. Instead, I threw myself onto Charlie’s back and told him to distract the other dragon, but it was too late, and the dragon killed Sigurd.”

I was relieved to tell someone everything. Nisha’s sympathetic eyes soothed the loneliness in my heart, and with every sip of my tea, I relaxed a little more.

She understands, and there’s something heartening about that.

“The first time I saw mine in danger, I remember feeling just as terrified. I wish I could tell you it gets easier, but I can’t.” I echoed her sad smile. “Did you see yourself in the vision?”

“No. In the vision, it was only my bonds on the roof when the dragon attacked. Then everyone else arrived, and Sigurd died.”

“So, the reality of the vision was different?”

“Yes. I got Baelen and Zaide off the roof and told Charlie to change so he would be more impervious to the attack. Thankfully, that was enough to protect them, but I hoped Sigurd wouldn’t die too.” I shook my head as the same helplessness I felt then resurfaced. “If I’d seen more than one scenario… If I could see how I could affect the vision…maybe he would still be here and we wouldn’t be in more danger.”

“That remains to be seen.” She sipped on her tea. “You escaped?”

I explained how Charlie and I distracted the dragon and survived its attack. Nisha seemed shocked at my vision and the revelation that Fafnir had separated himself from his dragon and it was dead.

But she smiled and said, “Well done.” I released a breath I wasn’t aware I was holding. I’d been prepared for scorn at my rash behavior, even horror that I killed the dragon, but she seemed glad. “You are surprised?”

“I just … reacted. I didn’t know how it was going to turn out, but I thought if I was with Charlie, I could make sure nothing terrible happened.”

She leaned over and placed a hand over mine. “You did well. For the first full vision you had without my supervision, you pushed down your fear and acted to protect yourself and your loved ones. No one can ask more of that.”

“But Sigurd—”

She interrupted me with a sharp shake of his head. “Was a casualty but is not the devastation to the realms that would have been had you and your bonds perished. He was probably happy to return to his afterlife.”

“You're probably right,” I replied quietly. Sigurd wasn’t interested in life. He didn’t seem interested in stopping Fafnir either for a while, but I was grateful he stepped up when he needed to.

Nisha turned her head to stare out of the window, her eyes going glassy. “I didn’t see any of your situation. The gaps in my knowledge are getting bigger, it seems. You’ll continue to get visions pivotal to the future of the realms. The rest will come as I decline more.”

“And are you … declining? Do you feel unwell?” *Is she aware of her forgetfulness and confusion?*

She smiled, and her eyes softened as they focused on me. “I feel fine. The breaks between my visions are rather nice.”

She doesn’t know. I don’t want to be the one to tell her.

So, all I said was, “That’s good.”

She patted my hand again. “I’m not in any hurry to die, Clawdia. Don’t worry.”

I nodded and finished my tea as I debated how to begin my next query.

“I’m going to tell my men about the visions and my powers and everything. They need to know.” I set my cup down. “I’m terrified about their reaction to this, especially Baelen’s, so I need to know what words are going to lead to the best outcome. How can I make myself see the future about this? About their reactions to me telling them?”

She gave me a sympathetic smile that made my stomach drop. “You can’t see the future about this.”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, begging to have misheard her.

“You will only see visions about yourself and your mates if you are in danger and need to be warned. The curse wants to live on and cannot if there is no host. Fate is supposed to be unbiased, so if you are directly involved in a situation, you will not see visions of it unless you are in danger. In those situations, you will be just as unaware of the future as everyone else. It is why the original Fates sequestered in a temple on Tartarus. They didn’t involve themselves with anyone, so they could see everything.”

I shook my head, confused. “Daithi saw himself rescuing Savida and Zaide.”

She shrugged. “He is not Fate. You have more power and scope, but he can see what affects his own life. It is not a fair curse.”

I blinked and rubbed my head, trying to understand the complications of seeing the future. “So, when the Fates told others what they’d seen, they didn’t know what that person’s reaction would be? Because then the Fates would see themselves in the vision?”

“Yes. They would have already seen multiple visions of this person. Multiple visions of the past, present, and future. However, they wouldn’t know which vision resulted from them telling the seeker. Or if they were all visions that resulted from staying silent. In the end, they gambled on their ability to manipulate titans into following the path suggested. They were good at it.”

I swallowed thickly. Nothing Nisha had said about the Fates sounded like a life I wanted to lead. “I don’t want to be locked away. I’ll go insane. And I don’t want to manipulate people either.”

“Which is why it’s easier to stay silent about your visions sometimes.”

I’d already guessed that much. But she didn’t reply to my comment about being locked away. She hadn’t always been confined to the cottage. It was self-imposed. Perhaps I didn’t want to be locked away yet, but maybe one day I would. It was a cheery thought.

“So, I can’t see my future. Or my bonds. But I saw my children? How could I see them?”

“Childbirth is still a risk to life. You were warned about that or shown them because your children have great destinies in the realms.”

The flash of my children didn’t feel like a warning or a danger. I frowned. “How do I tell the difference? If there’s a person close to me and involved in my life and I see them in a vision, how do I know if it’s just a normal vision about them or if they are a danger to me?”

She seemed as confused as I did for a moment, then her eyes widened, and she leaned forward. “Ah, I understand your confusion. Visions where you or your mates are in danger will show just that. With your children, if you saw yourself giving birth and the complications, that would be a warning. If you saw your friend hiding a knife behind their back as you walked together, that would be a warning of danger.

“If you are in the vision, it is a warning. If you are not, it is about the subjects, regardless of their relationship with you. You will know their future and be just as clueless about whether it happens as a result of you telling that person or because you do not.”

“This is terrible.” But having a vision did just save us from an attack. I thought about that vision of us under attack from the green dragon and how I wished I’d seen another version once I’d settled on how I was going to manage saving us. “How do I see multiple versions of my future when I’m in danger?”

“Titan powers are thread based. You know this.” She nodded at me. “The Fates were titans. The threads of Fate make up the fabric of the universe. You can now see that fabric. It takes some time to learn, but you can follow a thread in a vision, then follow a parallel one.” She must have seen the confusion on my face, because she gave an example. “In the attack's vision, you saw it and decided to change it. Were you still in the vision and more able to control it, you could have followed the thread backward, rewound the vision to another decision point, then followed that thread to a different conclusion.”

“The threads are decisions?”

“Lead off from them. You will see threads leading away from the vision to another one with each decision made. You can follow them forward or backward. You can get lost, so just as you do with the dreamscape, have a way of waking yourself up so you aren’t lost to your mind forever.”

I didn’t have a way to wake myself from the dreamscape, but I was too overwhelmed to ask about it now. *I’ll ask Baelen later.*

As I processed the information about my new powers, I asked, “Shouldn’t I have seen threads in the visions before now? Why haven’t I noticed that?”

She shrugged again and sighed. “The first time you used your titan power, you didn’t see the threads. This is much the same. You must look. It might take some getting used to it, so be careful.”

I nodded as my mind traveled to the vision I had of Fafnir promising revenge. “How can I tell the difference between the future, past, and present? I thought Fafnir’s warning might have been the present, but I’m not sure.”

“It is the same. Look for the threads and their colors. The past will be bronze, the present will be silver, and the future will be gold.” Nisha smiled, probably glad to have a relatively simple answer.

I found it interesting that gold meant the future, and I was glad they were different colors to the other threads I already saw too, but I didn’t have the energy to experiment with this new knowledge.

My hopes for a way to ease the tensions between my bonds and me once I tell them about the visions began bubbling up again.

“So, I won’t be able to see how to break the news of my visions to my bonds.” I licked my lips nervously and asked, “Do you have any advice?”

“It may not be as bad as you fear. They are good men.”

“They are the best, which is why it kills me to hurt them, to lie to them, to push them into doing things without explanation.” I shook my head. “You didn’t see how mad Baelen was when I put myself in danger to rescue Zaide. Baelen didn’t truly punish me, but I know how worried and disappointed he was in me. I … just need them right now, and I know this secret will not bring us together. It’s going to add a crack to our foundation.”

Nisha sighed and slouched as she thought for a moment, her gaze on the ceiling.

“In the beginning, my mates loved me more than the end of the realms. They understood the toll my visions took on me and did their best to alleviate it. They were amazing, and we worked hard to stop the crumbling of the interlinked realms. Yet as I saw more into the future, I became lost. I didn’t live for them. I lived for a day I couldn’t touch and may not even experience. I don’t regret all of that, but I think it added to the breakdown of our relationship. They became disbelieving, unlistening and uncaring. Unfortunately, Baelen got caught in all of that until I knew I had to leave to allow them to shape him in a way I couldn’t stand to see with my own eyes.”

I twisted my fingers into a knot to stop them shaking. *I can’t lose my men. I can’t be alone in the world again. I can’t be confined and tortured by visions.*

“How do I avoid that future?” My voice cracked, and tears welled in my eyes. “I am going to have to hide things and live in my visions.”

She stood and sat next to me, then wrapped her arms around me and whispered, “No, you won’t. Because you will touch the change you see. You and your children will change the realms for the better. You need only look a small distance ahead, and you will see that with your own eyes.”

I choked on a sob. “It seems unfair that you didn’t get to touch the change you wanted to see.”

“But I saw it. I knew—know—it will come to pass. I just couldn’t stop looking, I lived in a future that wasn’t mine to experience yet, and I should

have concentrated more on the change I could make in my own time.

“I wanted to see the day the ruin I caused was fixed, and I saw it. But it wasn’t me who did it. It took me a long time to get over that.” She wiped a tear from my cheek, and her smile was blurry as she continued, “I thought my purpose was to fix what I broke, but it turns out the great powers were waiting for the right souls to take on the task.”

“I’m sorry.”

She chuckled softly. “Nothing for you to be sorry about, my dear. It’s the way it’s supposed to be. And you are a great soul. I’m proud that my son will be part of this.”

“Baelen is going to be furious. At us both.” I took a deep breath, rubbed my face, and steeled myself. I would have to deal with their anger and pray they forgive me. “You should have a conversation with him. He’s missed you, and if I have to tell him you are dying but still won’t see him, he’s going to be distraught.”

She pursed her lips. “He knows his fathers are dying and that mates die together.”

I couldn’t understand her reluctance. She was dying. They’ve missed each other, and there wouldn’t be a lot of time together to make up for so much time apart. “He hasn’t had a lot of time to process the news about his fathers. I don’t think he’s realized it would mean your death, too. He’s envious I’ve been spending time with you but you won’t allow him to see you. Please.”

Her gaze searched mine, and after a long, tense pause, she nodded once. “I will speak to him once you have told them.”

I sighed and smiled gratefully as I squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

Before she could respond, her eyes went cloudy, and my stomach sank. She whispered, “You should leave. Someone is coming. You aren’t safe.”

* * *

MY EYES FLEW OPEN, and I lay rigid as I listened for sounds of someone in the cabin. Charlie’s soft snore and the wind blowing outside were all I could pick up. But human ears were useless.

I shifted to my familiar form and, in the distance heard someone approaching the cabin. The uncoordinated crunch of branches underfoot,

and a loud cough, didn't suggest hunters, but still … we needed to move.

We must have only had a few hours of sleep, so I didn't want to disturb Charlie, especially knowing how depleted he was previously, but while cats are mighty and fearless, I couldn't fight off a person alone.

"Charlie, get up. We need to leave."

Our bond felt … quiet, as though the connection was smothered, but my words were still loud enough to rouse him.

He stirred but threw a hand over his eyes and said, "Not now, Clawdicat. Sleeping."

I huffed my disapproval. Then I pounced on him and patted his face in rapid succession. He spluttered awake, pushing me away and hissing, "What the fuck?"

"There's someone coming. I'm going to distract them when they come in. You run out of the front door, and I'll meet you there. Then we'll fly to the office. Are you and Dralie all right with doing that?"

"Yes." He rolled out of the bed and started putting it back the way we found it. "I don't like using you as a distraction, though. It threatens my manhood."

"You, of all people, know how much of a terror I can be. Let me do my thing." I followed him as he headed to the bathroom.

"That sounds so weird coming from you." He chuckled quietly as he picked up the towels, mopped up the bathroom floor, and folded them. "Do your thing, Clawdicat." He picked me up, kissed my head, and placed me on the sofa before going to hide.

The door unlocked, and I mentally rolled my shoulders back, preparing for a fight. The singular hanging lightbulb flicked on, and I stayed still, curled up on the sofa, pretending to be asleep.

The stranger started shouting in Swedish, and I jumped up, turning as though I'd been startled awake. The man was middle-aged, wearing a thin blue raincoat and furious, so I couldn't catalogue any more of his appearance before he tried to hit me.

What kind of man screams at a cat who could have been looking for shelter? It wasn't true … but it could have been.

I launched myself at him, hissing and clawing into his face, and I had no remorse. He deserved it.

If he'd come in and been glad to find a cat, things would have played out differently. But now, he was going to pay. His screams were music to

my ears, and the lines in his raincoat filled me with satisfaction. When his grip tightened around my body and he threw me off him, I hit the wall and got the breath knocked out of me.

As the man took a breath, the bedroom door cracked open, and I knew Charlie was looking to see what was happening. Then the stranger took a step that seemed to shake the floorboards. I raced toward the bathroom. My plan was to lead him out of the main area so Charlie could escape, and I would follow behind him. But Charlie stormed into the room before the stranger could even turn to follow me.

CHAPTER 6

CHARLIE

As soon as the guy screamed, I knew he wouldn't fall for Clawdia's innocent cat trick. He was one of those arseholes that didn't like cats.

Then, when a bang shook the bedroom door and Clawdia's cry of pain echoed around the cabin, I peered out and fury flooded my veins.

I don't care if Clawdia thinks she can handle this. I'm not putting up with that.

I threw open the door and stormed into the room, and like a slow-motion movie villain, the bloke turned toward me just in time for my fist to smash into his face.

"Don't fucking touch my cat, you bastard," I growled as his eyes rolled back in his head and he went down like a sack of bricks.

I shook out my hand and winced. Punching people always looked cooler in movies.

Clawdia froze in place, staring at me with her wide violet eyes. "*Why did you do that? I was handling it.*"

Sure. I snorted. "No one lays a hand on you, and any guy who messes with animals earns a knuckle sandwich." I scooped her up, kissed the top of her fluffy head, and added with a grin, "Stay a cat. I'll fly us out of here, and Sleeping Beauty over there will forget we were here."

Without waiting for her reply, I hurried outside and shifted into scales, claws, and Dralie before launching into the sky and heading back.

Dralie was unusually quiet as we flew. I wasn't sure if he was just tired or what, but he'd talk if he wanted.

It didn’t take long. As the office building came into sight, he whispered, *“Charlie, we must speak.”*

“What are we doing right now?” I chuckled.

He didn’t think I was funny. *“It must remain a secret. Clawdia can’t know.”*

He has a secret he wants to keep from our mate? Color me surprised … and curious. “All right. Wait until she’s asleep, and then we’ll talk.”

He landed on the roof gracefully and allowed me to take over as Clawdia shifted, too. We paused, noting the scorch marks and the soot lining the rooftop but I grabbed Clawdia’s hand and tugged. “Come on, before my toes fall off.”

Shivering and naked, our bare feet slapping against the freezing slabs, we darted through the roof door and down the stairs, but as we entered the office, something felt off. The lights were out, and the desks had been stripped bare—no computers, no screens, not even a coffee mug. The place was emptier than my fridge on a bad week.

And it stunk of smoke. *What happened here?*

“Zaide? Baelen?” Clawdia called, her voice cutting through the silence.

I whipped around and glared at her. *“Don’t. Say. Anything. Else!”* I shouted through our bond, but she still had me blocked and didn’t hear me. I motioned for her to zip her lips and then tapped my head. The moment she opened our bond up again, I said, *“If they’re gone, someone probably chased them, and if someone chased them, that someone could still be here, sniffing around.”*

I wasn’t sure she heard me that time either. The bond felt … odd. Weaker? I couldn’t put my finger on the feeling, but when her eyes widened and she nodded, I sighed, glad she was going to follow instructions.

Naked and half frozen, I crept through the place, checking rooms with Clawdia trailing behind me. Nothing. Room after room was empty, and my shoulders finally relaxed when we found the last room—the one we’d planned to crash in—and it was blissfully free of bad guys.

“No one’s here,” I muttered, glancing at her. “Any ideas where they went? Can you contact them or something?”

Clawdia blinked like I’d just asked her to do brain surgery. “Oh … yeah.” She closed her eyes and went quiet. It must’ve worked, because a second later, she sighed and sagged into a chair.

“They’re alive,” she said. “And they’re at your house.”

Of course they were. “Great. Tell them they’d better shower before bed. Smoke is hell to get out of bed sheets, and I’m not scrubbing soot out of a duvet in the early hours.”

She relayed my message, and I heard Baelen’s reply in her mind. Though it sounded like it came through a bad phone line. *“He’ll be disappointed,”* he said, all smug-like. *“Oh, and his mother’s staying at Winnie’s with the task team leaders. She saw his house and is worried he’s been a lonely hermit his whole life.”*

“Oh, for—” I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Fantastic. Can’t wait for that conversation.”

Zaide’s voice broke in, gentler. *“Are you coming here?”*

I glanced at Clawdia, whose exhaustion mirrored my own. “Tell them not to wait up. We’ll deal with all of this in the morning.”

Clawdia passed on the message, and I sighed as she created a portal back to where it all started. My house.

* * *

THE HOUSE WAS dark and silent when we arrived. We didn’t wake and greet the others. *They’ll find us when we wake up. We need rest first.* Without a word to each other, we headed straight into my office, pulled out the sofa bed, and began putting the sheets on as though we’d lived together our entire lives. In a way, we had.

It was surreal having Clawdia here, human, as the woman I loved, not the cat. As we shoved pillows into cases, I couldn’t stop comparing the person she was when we left England to the woman I know now. They weren’t miles apart, of course, but she was more the sassy, mischievous cat I knew and loved.

We curled up in bed as the sun began rising into the sky, and Clawdia fell into a restless sleep. I watched her chest rise and fall, her eyelids flickering for a few moments before I addressed the dragon in my head.

“Go on. What have you been nagging me about?” I whispered.

Dralie sounded uncharacteristically nervous when he said, *“That dragon. I recognized it.”*

I paused, confused. “We’ve seen the dragon before. It chased us on the island. And we saw it on the cameras when it arrived at the hunter’s

compound. You didn’t recognize it then? Or didn’t say anything?”

“I didn’t recognize it then. Only when it chased us and attempted to forge a connection. I could sense it was an abomination, but I didn’t realize just how much.”

The mystery thickens. “So, who is the dragon?”

I thought he would reveal it was some kind of hybrid or magic made creature. Never in my wild imagination could I have predicted his next words. *“I believe … the dragon … was me.”*

“What?” My whole body stiffened, and I tried to calm my breathing so I didn’t wake Clawdia.

What the fuck does he mean? Can dragons lose their minds? Does he need a shrink?

“I know it is strange…” he tried to explain, but I shook my head.

“You can’t be that dragon. You’re my dragon. You said you’ve been lying dormant inside me, waiting for the moment my power could break free.”

“I was dormant, true,” he hesitated, but continued softly, *“but not always inside of you, I fear.”*

Just the sadness in his voice made me pause. *He really believes this. He truly thinks he was the dragon. What am I missing?*

“You think you were him in a past life or something?”

“Of a kind. I didn’t know just how immediate that past was.”

“You’re not making any sense.” I could feel how distressed he was. Even Clawdia tossed around in her sleep, probably responding to our stress, and I stroked her head as I softened my voice. “Try to explain it as though I’m a complete numpty. Really dumb it down for me.”

“That dragon was without a drakorian inside its mind. I could sense it was an abomination. I knew it went against the laws of our nature, but I didn’t know until I touched its mind that it was empty. There was only a dragon’s body, not a drakorian or dragon inside.”

“So, it was a shell? A shell you think you came from…?”

He sighed. *“You need the history to understand. Drakorians, as we are today, are two souls twisted together. A dragon and the descendants of those who agreed.”*

“They made a pact to be together?”

“Correct. The pact to entwine our souls so both our kind could survive. The people of Drakor were dying from a famine. They turned to hunting

dragons, a sacred beast, who ate all the game and then attacked the people. The deaths of both sides nearly decimated them both until a seer told them of another way. A pact to live in harmony together. It required their souls to be twisted together so they shared a body. They would begin as human because they wouldn't drain as many resources, but once a male child turned pubescent, a dragon would emerge."

I hummed thoughtfully and scratched my stomach. "Seems like a bad deal for the dragons."

"No, the dragons were happy with this agreement. They not only ensured their survival, but could also find their mate faster since the females would only emerge once they met their bond. Previous to this, dragons, as solitary creatures, could spend centuries searching for their mate, and the population suffered because of this."

"Somehow, I don't think it was as easy as that."

"Perhaps not, but that is the story I was told."

I frowned. "When were you told that?"

"In my first life, I lay dormant, awaiting the moment to emerge into the world. Our father would tell stories occasionally of his homeland, Drakor, and while I wasn't entirely conscious, I could hear and understand."

"I'm enjoying the story, Dralie, but what's this got to do with the dragon we killed, and why do you think you are that dragon?" I yawned, his voice and the tale lulling me to sleep.

"The dragon was a beast. Mindless. It wasn't trying to contact us as other drakorians might have. I believe I slipped into its mind for a moment and … to my shame, Charlie, I allowed us to be steered into danger, and our mate had to protect us. I'm certain this was only possible because I used to be the dragon inside of that body before I came to you."

Suddenly wide awake, my mind raced to keep up, but with no Scooby Doo clue what he was trying to tell me, I gave my best guess. "You think your old body was brought back to life and controlled? Something like that?"

"I wish it were, but the truth is far more complicated." Before I could ask anything else, he continued in a hurry. *"My last bond … I told you he shunned me. He never allowed me to stretch my wings. He didn't speak to me. He cut me off and kept me locked in the furthest reaches of his mind, where it was always dark. Whenever he released me, which is rare, I*

struggled to understand what was happening. I received little information from my bond and just tried to survive."

His situation reminded me of Savida's, being stuck in darkness waiting for freedom, and it gutted me to hear him so broken up as he recalled this.

"I didn't know it was that bad, Dralie. I'm sorry he did that to you. He sounds like a right prick."

"Do not apologize to me, Charlie. I emerged from the dark after the most immense pain. I thought it was death, which is why I believed I had been reborn with you, that I had lain dormant in your body, but I don't believe that anymore. I opened my eyes, and I was in a new form, and you were in my head instead of … him. I cannot tell you how grateful I am to have you as my bond now, but to my shame, I have been keeping a secret from you. One I now understand the full truth of."

"So mysterious. I'm a priest in a confession box; tell me your sins," I said to lighten the mood, but he made a whimper that alarmed me. I couldn't stay in bed. The rollercoaster of emotions needed to be paced away. Quietly, I shuffled back and forth behind my desk. "That was a joke. Whatever you've kept from me, it's fine. I don't expect you to tell me everything. You're your own… dragon."

Dralie remained silent, and his sadness bled into me. I didn't want him to be sad, but whatever his secret, it made him feel guilty. Better out than in.

To prompt him, I said, "So, you think your last bond died forcing you to find another soul to bond to with drakorian blood?"

"He did not die. If we die, we should die together. My previous body, the green dragon, shouldn't exist without me. I believe he parted us. He has broken the original pact and untied our souls, but he kept my body and used it."

I went cold and froze as I finally understood what he was saying.

"Dralie, your old bond, was it Fafnir?"

His silence spoke volumes.

"You were Fafnir's dragon."

"I was." His voice was distant and muffled.

Anger burst out, and I whisper-shouted at him. "You pretended you didn't even know who he was. You didn't even react when we saw him and the dragon together on the cameras. You couldn't tell he'd separated you both when you saw your old body?"

“I—I—I can only apologize, Charlie.” The tremble in his voice made me feel like a monster. *“I believed him dead. No. I hoped him dead, and I hoped to have escaped, but I was mistaken. When we saw the dragon and Fafnir together on the cameras I thought as you did, that he had turned one of his family. I didn’t recognize the dragon form as my own because, on the occasions he freed me from the darkest corners of his mind, I didn’t spend it looking at glass and admiring myself. I just wanted to fly.”*

My anger cooled as I realized he was a victim in this, even if he kept it a secret. The poor bastard didn’t even have a name before I gave him one. He was finally free of the cock who kept him caged. He just wanted to fly and prove his worth to me because he was scared I’d be the same as his last bond.

I couldn’t fault him for hoping Fafnir was dead. Plenty of people have done the same. Nor could I fault him for being hesitant to tell me anything when he discovered Fafnir was still alive and hunting us.

“Explain how can your old body be flying around without you. What happened to you and Fafnir to be separated? Did he do it on purpose? Did he think you would go to one of his witches?”

“He hated me. Hated being drakorian. He preferred his witch side.” It must have freaked him out when he found out I was a witch, too. *“He didn’t want me and often spoke of getting rid of me. I don’t think he considered me a being, nor the consequences of his magic. I believe it is only by some miracle of fate that I could come to you. I’m not sure exactly how he did it. I only remember the pain.”*

Considering he was in so much pain when he arrived in my body, which was also mid torture, I’m surprised he didn’t go full Hulk mode on everyone.

My mind was a complete mess, and I stayed silent as I worked through my thoughts.

Dralie whispered, *“Are you angry with me?”*

“I’m not angry.”

“I will accept the punishment you decide for keeping such important information from you, Charlie. I only ask that if you push me into the darkness of my soul, you don’t leave me there long. I—I—I would be … very scared.”

That was gutting, and I actually teared up a little.

I choked down the emotion and tried to assure him. “I wouldn’t do that to you because I’m not that fucker and won’t ever be. This situation is the most confusing and impossible, so I won’t punish you for trying to deal with it the best you can.”

“Thank you, Charlie.”

His thanks pissed me off. “You don’t have to thank me for that either. No one should treat you like that. It’s not even the bare minimum. And if your history lesson was right, then we were supposed to be partners. I don’t rule over you, and you don’t rule over me. We share the benefits of it all.”

“You are right, Charlie.” He bolstered himself and became the calm, wise dragon I knew again. *“I’ve spent so many years in the darkness that I have forgotten myself, but I will work to be a dragon worthy of you and our mate.”*

“You already are,” I replied easily. Mystery solved, and the dragon calmed. I eased myself into my leather desk chair and relaxed. “And the good news is that we know Fafnir has lost the benefit of you. He’s just a witch now. He’s still dangerous because he practices dark magic, but he can’t fly, he can’t breathe fire, and he is missing part of his soul. Who knows what that will have done to him? He’s just handed the other team the tool to win.”

“You think I am the tool to win against him?” He sounded surprised.

“Dralie, this fucker pushed you away so much you didn’t get to fly and then broke his pact and caused you so much pain you thought you’d died. Even if you don’t want revenge, I do. And what he didn’t appreciate about you, we’ll use against him.”

I picked up my word-of-the-day calendar and, using the light from the sunrise peeking through the window, started tearing off all the days I hadn’t been here for.

“Your support means the entire realm to me, Charlie. I want to help you bring him to justice. I want to destroy him for causing so much pain.”

“We’ll do it.” *We’ve got no other choice.* Just then, Clawdia grumbled in her sleep, rolling over onto my side of the bed. “What do I tell Clawdia? Do you want her to know?”

“Do you think she will be angry?”

I pursed my lips. “She has a past with Fafnir. He was the reason she took her life and was reborn as a familiar. I don’t think she’ll be angry. She

knows you are a good egg but may not understand where you were and why you couldn't help."

His shame and regret made my stomach hurt. *"If I knew she was mine, if I had fought him for control or peaked out from the darkness, I could have been there and saved her."*

"Don't put that on yourself. I don't think she would blame you, but our dynamic is hard to explain." I wanted to be honest with him in case she didn't react as I expected.

"I don't want to upset her by reminding her of her past, and I don't want to risk her reproach."

"Maybe we should just keep it to ourselves for now. We'll figure out a way to explain how we know about Fafnir's dragon."

I felt his agreement as I turned my computer on and placed my calendar back on the desk. I'd torn eighteen days off. Eighteen days since we left for Sweden. It was laughable how much had changed in such a short time.

"I have to ask, though. Do you remember attacking us in the warehouse?"

"Attacking you?" Dralie repeated.

"It wasn't long after Fafnir had been brought back to life. You'd been flying around."

"I remember surging from the ground and then seeing something of interest, but so many people attacked me that I had to fight back. I flew for a long time until he took over and pushed me away again. The next time I awoke…"

He went quiet, and I regretted asking as he made that pained whimper again.

"I shouldn't have asked," I said quickly and waved my hand. "Don't think about it."

But it was too late. He cried, *"I attacked you. He told me you were trying to kill us and I—"*

I cut him off. Having a hysterical dragon crying in your mind at six in the morning was not a vibe. "He wasn't wrong. We were trying to kill him, so don't apologize for saving yourself. You've been through a lot, and it's probably really confusing for you to sort through."

I made a mental note to get his soul checked. *After being risen from the dead twice and then being pushed into me, surely it will have an effect. Is there a soul doctor?*

Or maybe the fact Fafnir pushed him away means he was saved from the poison of the dark magic? I don't know.

Dralie asked quietly, "*You truly don't hold me responsible?*"

I logged into my emails out of habit, but one immediately caught my eye.

Adam.

It read: "I've found the bastard who hacked me and got him back. If you want the details, call me."

I smiled. "I don't blame you at all. Tomorrow's another day, Dralie, and once we've got all our cards on the table, everything is going to be fine."

* * *

BANGING WOKE ME UP. With bleary eyes, I checked the clock on the wall to see it was midday. I'd had a good few hours' sleep, and if whoever was banging would fucking stop, I could go back to sleep.

I stretched, my arms crossing the side of the bed where my familiar should have been, and woke up properly. The sheets were warm, so she hadn't been gone long.

Is she the one making all the noise? She's been acting weird lately, so I wouldn't put it past her.

As I threw some joggers on, I remembered the flashes of guilt that crept into her expression when she thought I wasn't looking.

I knew she was keeping secrets from me. She seemed to have forgotten about my special talent of finding things out. But I didn't address it with her or look into it.

I was glad she was hiding something, because now it meant that she wouldn't be looking too closely at my face and seeing my secrets. I gave into the distraction she offered because I trusted that she'd confess eventually.

I opened the office door to be met with angry purple eyes narrowed at me. Clawdia had her back to the front door, which shook with the relentless knocking of someone outside.

I groaned and said, "There's only one person who could make you want to kill me with your eyes."

CHAPTER 7

CLAWDIA

I woke up with my head buried in Charlie's shoulder and a loud knocking coming from the front door. I moaned quietly so as not to wake Charlie, threw on his shirt, and hurried to quiet the intruder.

With a scowl on my face, bed head, and my legs exposed, I hoped to scare the person off with a single look, but my eyes widened as I swung open the front door to see…

"Lydia?"

Styled into beautiful big curls, her brown hair looked gorgeous. She had a warm glow to her skin and a blush on her cheeks which, coupled with the short dress and thin jacket, suggested she was either immune to the morning chill or was looking to catch the attention of her ex-boyfriend.

That infuriated me.

How dare she come here to get him back? If I had my claws, I would have already aimed them at her green eyes which trailed over me, judging. The only satisfaction I had was that her face had fallen at the sight of me.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

Her question made me panic, and I slammed the door shut in her face.

"Oh god," I muttered.

Of course she doesn't know me. I'm human now. She doesn't know I turned human. Why is she here, though? She'd better not think she can take Charlie back. She might have gotten between us before, but he's my witch now, my mate, and we can't be separated.

She started knocking again, and I glared at the door as though I could shoot lasers through my eyes.

Charlie opened the office door and strolled out in a pair of jogging bottoms that should be illegal. I turned my glare on him and crossed my arms. He froze, and his gaze shifted between the door shaking with each loud bang and me.

He groaned. “There’s only one person who makes you want to kill me with your eyes.”

“Then you’ve already guessed who it is.” My lips smiled, but my eyes remained narrowed. “Why don’t you open the door, Charlie?”

He shook his head, held up his hands, and backed away. “This feels like a trap.”

A creek drew our attention to the top of the stairs, and Zaide quickly jogged down wearing only a pair of shorts that barely covered him.

“Clawdia, Charlie, you’re here. Thank the gods you are safe.” He pulled me into his arms, lifting me until I needed to wrap my legs around his waist and hold on as he swung me around. I sighed into his giant embrace, his warm skin and smell settling me, my frustration leaking away.

“We snuck in during the night. Didn’t want to wake you,” I told him, and he kissed my forehead before placing me back down.

“Sounds like someone else wants to wake us, though,” Baelen said dryly, following Zaide down the stairs much more slowly. He tilted my chin up and kissed my lips gently. “I’m glad to see you safe, Sunlight, but we will talk about your excursion once our guest has been dealt with,” he muttered.

I sighed and nodded. There was no way to avoid it.

“Nice to see you too, Zaide, Baelen,” Charlie said sarcastically. He crossed his arms and caught my gaze. “I might as well be invisible to them.”

Zaide smiled and slapped him on the back. “I didn’t forget you, my friend. I’m glad to see you, too.”

Baelen shrugged but didn’t move away from me to greet Charlie. He gave him a tilted smile and said, “You aren’t invisible. My ring is right here.” Baelen lifted his hand, and the powerful relic glinted on his finger.

“You’re a smug fucker,” Charlie muttered and narrowed his eyes.

Baelen raised his eyebrows and asked, “Are you going to open the door? The noise is getting irritating.”

My face fell as I remembered Lydia and huffed. Baelen smiled at me, his red eyes swirling with mischief. “Let’s give Charlie some room to deal

with his guest, Sunlight."

I opened my mouth to protest as he pulled Zaide and me into the sitting room, and then a familiar buzzing glazed over my skin.

I looked at my mate and asked, "Are we invisible right now?"

Baelen squeezed my hand, smirked, and whispered. "You want to see what she wants, but she will not reveal herself to anyone but Charlie."

My scowl deepened, and I crossed my arms. "She better not reveal herself to Charlie."

Charlie rubbed his head as he looked in our direction. "I can hear you, so you'd all better be on your best behavior until I can get rid of her."

He did a quick jog on the spot, stretched and took a deep breath before opening the door, revealing the red-faced witch. "Charlie—" she started.

He interrupted and asked bluntly, "What are you doing here?"

She paused. "Not quite the welcome I was expecting. Who is the girl?"

Charlie waved his hand. "Forget Clawdia, why are you here?"

"Clawdia?"

He narrowed his eyes. "How did you know I was here?"

"You live here. I used to come here all the time."

I gagged, and Zaide's silent chuckle vibrated against my back.

"But how did you know I was back from Sweden?" Charlie asked.

She shrugged. "I assumed you didn't take part in the ceremony and left."

"Is that what you did?"

"The ceremony was sabotaged, so I came home. I didn't take that much time off work, so I couldn't commit to helping fix it."

I had wondered why we hadn't seen her again since the first ceremony attempt. I didn't remember seeing her face in the crowd when I raised Fafnir and Sigurd. Nor at the hotel where the witches had Sigurd stuffed in a wardrobe. Or on the island. Maybe she was telling the truth, but it was suspicious that she was here knocking on his door the moment we arrived back. Did she place a spell of some sort to let her know when he came back? Or was she here under orders?

"Are you going to let me in?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips and rolling her eyes as though she was bored with his questions.

"I'm not sure yet."

"Because of your lady friend?"

He shrugged, and I smiled. “And because I think it’s suspicious that you’re here when I just got here myself.”

“It’s not suspicious.” Her brow furrowed. “I tried to knock at Winnie’s. Is she still in Sweden?”

“No. She’s dead.” He said it in such a matter-of-fact way that it even surprised me. Lydia’s mouth dropped open, and I hissed.

“Charlie, there are better ways to tell her that her friend is dead.”

I wasn’t sure if he heard me through our bond since there was still something odd about it, but he didn’t react, so I couldn’t tell either way.

“What?” Lydia croaked. She searched his eyes as tears welled in hers. “Are you being serious?”

He sighed, and his demeanor softened. *She’s not a good actor. She’s got to be telling the truth. She doesn’t know what happened.*

“You haven’t spoken to anyone from the ceremony?” he asked, leaning against the door.

“No. I texted Simon once but didn’t get a reply. I thought a meeting would be called to talk about the next move, but I must have been left off the list. I don’t know what’s been happening. Even the fact that Debs had to step down as representative was only announced on Facebook last night.” She was talking fast, her hands shaking, and the shock and worry in her voice couldn’t be faked. “Is Winnie really dead? Was it something to do with the ceremony? Does Mary know?”

Charlie looked behind her and sighed. “Come in. This isn’t going to be a fun conversation.”

“I just don’t understand how she could be dead,” Lydia said in a small voice as she sat on the sofa in front of us and buried her head in her hands.

Although I didn’t care for Lydia, I knew what it was like to lose Winnie. Her tears reminded me of my witch and my grief. My breathing hitched, and my vision blurred as tears welled in my eyes. Baelen and Zaide, so in tune with me and my emotions, squeezed my hands and pulled me closer to them.

“What happened?” She looked up at Charlie, who sat in the armchair closest to us.

“I’m sorry. She’s really is gone. Mary killed her.”

Lydia’s mouth dropped open. “Mary killed her? Why? What happened? I don’t understand. They loved each other.”

“Mary didn’t love Winnie. She slashed her neck to make a dark magic knife for Fafnir. She’s on the bad guy’s team.”

“You are terrible at breaking news to someone,” I scolded, but again, he didn’t react or reply to my word through our bond.

Lydia stood up, shaking her head, her curls getting frizzier by the second. “I’m sorry. I just can’t believe that. Fafnir? The dragon? Who killed Sigurd? He isn’t—”

“Look, I could spend all day trying to fill you in on what you missed, but frankly, I don’t have the time. You still haven’t told me why you are here, and I’ve got a low supply of trust in witches at the moment.”

“I—I wanted to see if you were all right after everything. It’s probably hard coming to terms with being a witch. I thought—I thought I could help. You called me before.”

“And that’s all? No one asked you to be here?”

“I saw a post from the new witch representative. At least, that’s who she claimed to be, but now I’m not so sure. She asked for a potions master to come to Winnie’s address as soon as possible. I’m the most local potions master, and I really wanted to check in on you both after everything. Didn’t you say you had an argument with her about Clawdia?” She gasped. “Oh, Charlie. You must be devastated. Were you here with Clawdia when she passed? Are you all right?”

She hovered in front of him, clearly unsure if her comfort would be welcome, and I held back a hiss. If I were a cat, I wouldn’t have let her get this close to him. Not while I was watching. But I was human Clawdia, and human Clawdia hadn’t been revealed yet. But the time was near, and I couldn’t wait for Lydia to realize how right she was to be worried about her man’s relationship with a familiar. I grinned.

“Clawdia’s fine. I’m fine. Was the new representative called Elizabeth?”

She completely ignored his question. “What do you mean Clawdia’s fine? If Winnie is really dead, shouldn’t she also have passed? Are you lying to me?”

“I’m not lying. Winnie is definitely dead, and Clawdia would have been too if Winnie was still her witch.” He held up a hand to silence her next question. “How much do you want to know? If you get involved in this mess, there’s no getting out of it. And considering you were willing and happy to use demon fire, knowing it came from demons left suffering

endless misery underground, you might not find the answers you were hoping for."

She frowned. "It was important. Sometimes sacrifices need to be made."

"You don't sacrifice the innocent."

She tilted her head and looked at him as if he were an alien. Like she'd never seen him before. Her eyes widened. "You sabotaged the event."

"Guilty." He smiled and shrugged. He was probably reminiscing about shattering those jars and smacking witches with a branch.

"Why?"

Savida came downstairs at exactly the right moment. "To save me," he announced cheerfully. "And I'm forever in his debt."

He wandered straight to the kitchen to look for food, completely ignoring Lydia. Daithi followed him closely but paused at the kitchen door to ask, "Charlie why is this female in your home? She smells peculiar."

He shrugged in reply. "She was making a lot of noise, so I had to let her in."

Lydia really didn't like that. She crossed her arms and harrumphed as I covered my mouth.

"Zaide and Baelen didn't hear it?"

Charlie smirked. "Oh, they did. They are around."

Lydia shifted from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable, and said, "I didn't know you had guests, Charlie. Maybe I should—"

Daithi tilted his head and smiled in a nonthreatening way that somehow looked terrifying on him. "Don't go. You were just about to explain why killing my mate was for the greater good."

Charlie tried to excuse her. "She doesn't know everything that happened yet."

He gave Charlie a bored look before heading into the kitchen to eat with his mate.

Lydia whispered, "You sabotaged the ceremony to save your demon friend, and I understand that, but I explained why it had to be done. I told you the story of Sigurd and how he would protect all the innocent people from being taken by otherworlders. Faei. Like him. You could have just chosen to save your friend. You didn't have to take out all the other fires."

"If you're trying to make me feel guilty, then you're barking up the wrong tree. Savida, Alcor, and the other demons didn't deserve to be used

for a stupid spell to raise the protector, especially when you weren't doing it for the greater good. You were being manipulated."

She clenched her jaw. "What do you mean by that?"

He sighed. "I'm not going to explain. If Elizabeth called you to make a potion for her, then she can explain everything that happened."

"So she's real? And she's the new representative?" she asked.

"Yes. And she's staying at Winnie's right now. So go there for your answers."

"Why are you being so snappy?"

"Because I've had three hours of sleep and the craziest month of my life, only to be woken up by your banging, which has pissed me off. And now Clawdia's pissed at me because you're here, so I have to talk her down too."

I bit my lip to stop my laugh escaping. He had done nothing too terrible yet. But that wasn't for him to know. It was good to keep him on his toes.

"If all the noise is done with, we are going to go back to bed before everyone else arrives," Daithi announced as he left the kitchen. Both he and Savida had bowls of cereal in their hands, and my stomach growled. It felt like a lifetime since I'd eaten.

"Yeah, yeah." Charlie's voice covered my stomach as he waved them away, and Lydia's wide eyes followed Savida's black wings as they fluttered up the stairs.

"You are having more … otherworlders over here?" She looked fearfully toward the door as though a hoard of demons were seconds away from bursting in.

Charlie rubbed his head. "The supernatural task team is next door with Elizabeth. They'll be around to wake us all up and start planning soon. So please, leave."

"Supernatural task team? I've never heard of…"

"It's not known to the little people."

Her outraged gasp brought her back to life. No longer afraid, she practically had flames in her eyes as she shouted, "Enough with your attitude! Do you know who you're talking to? I'm a potions master. I am one of the most skilled witches in the country, and I asked to participate in the witch event of the year. I was the one who knew about your heritage before you did, so don't you dare patronize me. I'm your superior."

Charlie started laughing, and she shook with fury but remained silent, waiting for his mirth to end. He leaned forward, resting his head on his bent arms as he said, “You know nothing, Lydia, and you certainly don’t know that you’re superior to me.”

Her face paled, and she stepped back. “Your eyes.”

“Another recent development in my search for family.” He shrugged and leaned back in the chair. Unable to stop myself, I stroked his arm. It settled the wildly possessive urge inside of me, which really didn’t enjoy that Lydia could see his bare chest and couldn’t see my hand marking it.

Lydia swallowed audibly. “What are you?”

“A lot of things. Probably an arsehole, first and foremost.”

“In that, we agree.” His answer must have assured her, because she sat back down on the sofa slowly. Yet she stared at Charlie with a wariness that suggested she thought he was either sick or dangerous. Maybe both. “I have missed a lot.”

“You have.”

She licked her lips. “You keep talking about Clawdia. Will you tell me what you mean? It’s not possible for her to have a new witch. Familiars live and die with their witch. If Winnie is dead, Clawdia must be, too. I want to help you, but I need to understand.”

“Don’t look at me like that. You might think you’re right, but you’ve missed out on a lot of witch teaching and history lessons recently, so no, you’re wrong. I don’t know why Elizabeth asked you here, especially considering your opinions on the otherworlders and supernaturals, but it’s not to fix me. I’m fine.”

“But you must be grieving. You were unusually close to Clawdia.”

“She’s not dead.” Charlie gripped my hand on his shoulder, and I squeezed Baelen’s. Lydia jumped and screamed as we appeared. I can’t say it didn’t bring me some satisfaction. It made me remember the days I used to run her off from Charlie. Protecting my territory, he called it.

Although it could have been the sight of my soul pair and mate standing behind me that frightened her. They were rather fearsome.

“Charlie, who are these people you’ve found?” she whimpered and almost backed herself against the wall. I restrained myself from rolling my eyes, but I thought it was a little dramatic.

“My new family.” He put an arm around my legs and squeezed. “And as you can see, Clawdia is fine.”

She didn’t look at me for more than a moment before turning to Charlie with a concerned look on her face. “Charlie, this woman, whoever she is, is not Winnie’s familiar. She’s human.”

She was looking at him like he was deranged, no longer afraid, and I couldn’t help sniggering as she mumbled, “if he needs a potion to counteract a curse, I’m going to need more supplies.”

“I’m not cursed. This woman is Clawdia. She used to be a cat and Winnie’s familiar. She turned human again, and when Winnie died, I could transfer the bond to me to save her. Or something like that.”

I waved. “Hi, Lydia. It’s nice to see you again.”

Words coming out of my mouth seemed to send her reeling. She gaped at me, her eyes flicking all over me, and I knew the moment she could see Clawdicat in me. “You slammed the door in my face.”

I shrugged, and my lips twitched. “Automatic reaction.”

“I knew it.” She pointed at us as her confusion turned to rage. “I knew there was something strange going on with you and that cat. How long has this been going on?”

“Charlie never cheated on you. I wasn’t human until an accident happened a few weeks ago and we followed Winnie to Sweden to rescue Savida.”

“You betrayed your witch.” The accusation was like a stab to my heart.

I tried to keep the emotion out of my voice as I replied, “She betrayed me, and then Mary betrayed her and slit her throat when we arrived to sabotage the ceremony.”

“You should have died. You … being human … being alive should be impossible.” She slumped against the wall, almost crouching.

“Charlie saved me. He’s my witch.”

Charlie muttered, “Dralie would like me to remind you I’m also your mate.”

I smiled down at him and stroked his jaw with my thumb. “I remember.”

Lydia screamed as the front door opened.

CHAPTER 8

CLAWDIA

Elizabeth strolled inside as though she owned the place. She frowned at Lydia and then turned her gaze to us. “Who is this?” she asked.

Charlie countered her question with another question. “How the fuck did you get in?”

She rolled her eyes. “Magic. Don’t underestimate me, Charlie. I’m the witch representative now.”

He crossed his arms. “You’re really leaning into this job role for someone who had to be talked into it.”

“And you look like the leader of a mafia, sat in your chair with those three around you.” She tutted. “Really, you’ve frightened this poor girl half to death.”

“That’s right, blame me. Not like you barging in didn’t scare her,” Charlie grumbled.

“She just learned a few home truths, that’s all,” I said.

Understanding lit Elizabeth’s eyes and she turned to Lydia. “Ah. You must be the potion master. Thank you for coming. I hope my son and his friends weren’t too unwelcoming.”

“Son? He’s your son? You’re on his side?”

“Side?”

Charlie sighed. “The side where we rescue the evil demons and ruin the witch's plans.”

“Ah.” Elizabeth nodded and held out a hand to help Lydia to her feet. “I’m sure this is all very confusing for you. Come for a walk with me, dear. I need to explain a few things before we go any further.”

Lydia cast us a quick glance, and I waved as Elizabeth ushered her out of the door. The sudden quiet was so welcome we all sighed.

“Thank God she’s gone.”

Baelen raised a questioning eyebrow at me. “I’ve never seen you so possessive, Sunlight.”

“I don’t like her thinking she can have Charlie again.” I looked down at Charlie, my hand still touching him. “And I didn’t like her looking at you half naked either. You’re mine. Put clothes on before she comes back. If I see her eyes drop to your chest again, I might do something I’ll later regret.”

Charlie stood up laughing. “You know I’d love to see that cat fight.”

“Your mother needs her alive,” I muttered.

He laughed again before he dropped a kiss to my forehead and headed upstairs. “Don’t start the lecture before I get back,” he called to Baelen, who nodded. I frowned but turned in Zaide’s arms to nuzzle into his chest. His arms surrounded me in the warmest hug, and all my tension melted away.

“Little Cat, you should also get dressed,” Zaide said into my hair. My legs were admittedly cold, but he was doing a great job of warming me.

Baelen whispered, “No need to hurry. You smell delicious,” as he crowded behind me, pressing me closer to my soul pair and settling his hands on my thighs.

I shivered as excitement swirled in my stomach. “I do?”

“You and Charlie celebrated without us last night,” he whispered, his lips brushing the tip of my ear.

“You can smell that?”

“I can.”

I looked over my shoulder to see him. “Are you upset?”

He smiled. “Disappointed to have missed it, yes, but not upset it happened. You and Charlie can have time together just as we all do.”

My eyes widened as my gaze flicked from Baelen’s smug grin to Zaide’s shy smile. “Did something happen between you?”

“Not what you are thinking.”

“I allowed him some blood. From my finger,” Zaide whispered.

I knew exactly how much that meant to my soul pair. He struggled so much with blood, considering his past, and feeding Baelen would have

triggered him in ways I couldn't imagine. Yet he fought against his fear and offered something so sacred to his people, to his soul mate.

"You did? That's incredible, Zaide. I'm so proud of you. That must have been hard." I squeezed him, and he squeezed gently back. I looked back at Baelen. "Does our blood taste the same? Is he your sunlight too?"

I wasn't really concerned Zaide was going to take my nickname. In fact, I was happy to share it, as well as everything else, with him. But it might get confusing if we were both Baelen's sunlight.

Baelen's eyes glazed as he thought. "There are only varying periods of darkness in Akar; our stars are so dim. Your blood is like the sunlight I experience in Tartarus. Powerful. Bright. Warm. Zaide's is the same but not. My favorite time of day in Tartarus is when the sun falls just behind the horizon and the light scatters across the sands, making them sparkle. The sky darkens, but the land comes alive for the few moments before darkness falls. His blood is like this. Brilliant. Tinged with the dark. He is my sunset."

I stared in awe at my mate. So poetic and honest. I couldn't help but be impressed. "Wow."

I looked up, noting with extreme happiness that Zaide's cheeks had turned that lovely rose gold from a blush, and his eyes stared forward at our soul mate with the beginning of love.

My lips pressed together so I didn't squeal with excitement. There was nothing more I wanted than to see them come together. I wasn't jealous to think about it. I loved them both so much, and they were as made for each other as I was. I only wanted them to feel that too. To fall in love and be as they were meant to be.

They were hesitant and nervous around each other, and I found it so endearing to watch these men learn to be vulnerable with each other, to lower their guards, to open their hearts and forget their fears.

I also found it frustrating. Short of shouting "Kiss!" at them through our bonds, I couldn't push them.

The sexual tension made me squirm, and Zaide's hands tightened around my body as Baelen's eyes darkened and fell to me. "Clawdia," he growled in warning.

"I can't help that," I hissed.

"Perhaps I should do something about it, then."

He kissed me, and I fell into the feeling of his lips, his hands holding my neck and his thumb stroking my jaw. I should have loved being in his arms, but there was a nagging voice full of guilt and anxiety in the back of my mind. How could I enjoy his love and affection when I knew it would disappear as soon as I confessed the truth?

I pulled back and saw the confusion in his gaze as he asked, “Sunlight?”

Just then, Charlie hurried back down the stairs, washed and dressed. “Do either of you have my phone by any chance?”

Zaide replied but didn’t back away from me. “Yes. It’s there on the counter. I plugged it into your charger.”

Charlie paused, his eyebrow raised in surprise, before he smiled proudly. “Look at you learning the tech and the lingo. We’ll make a modern man out of you yet.”

“Male,” Zaide muttered into my hair as he kissed my head.

“Semantics.” Charlie pulled the phone off the line and smiled as he placed it in his pocket. He clapped. “Right. I’m starving, and it feels like ages since I’ve had a decent meal. Fancy going out? I can’t be arsed for the conversation we’ll get dragged into with Lydia and Elizabeth if we stay here.”

He was right. Staying there would mean planning our next move, listening to Elizabeth’s plans for Lydia, and telling them what happened to the dragon and what I knew about it.

But I couldn’t do that without discussing it with my bonds first. They deserved a private conversation.

“That would be nice, actually.”

“It’s a date.” He winked at me before looking at the others. “Now let go of my familiar and get ready. I’ll leave a note for the others, and hopefully nothing will fall apart while we eat.”

He was talking about the task team getting into trouble, but I knew the next disaster would come from much closer to home, and the responding fallout would be my fault.

* * *

IN MY FAMILIAR FORM, I jumped out of Charlie’s window in an automated move that, despite not having been done for a while, felt just as natural as

when I did it every day.

Over the kitchen roof, down onto the fence, before dropping to the grass and hurrying inside the cat flap; it was as easy. I sneaked past everyone milling about the kitchen and living room and headed straight upstairs to Winnie's bedroom.

It looked exactly as I left it and was no less heartbreaking to see. The small picture of us on her bedside table reminded me things weren't going back to the way they used to be and I'd never see my first friend—my sister—in this life again.

She would have had advice for me.

She would say something like "Relationships aren't always good. Sometimes you'll fight, and sometimes you'll do or say things you regret. Just apologize, and hopefully they forgive you. And if it takes them some time, stick with it, especially if you think they are worth it."

It was probably my imagination, but I thought I could hear her voice as I shifted into my human form and took a few pieces of her clothes to wear to dinner.

"Does this say 'I need you to forgive me for the secrets I've kept and the impact it will have on our lives?'" I whispered to myself. I half hoped I could turn around and find Winnie on the bed ready to give her opinion as I often did. She wasn't, but a voice in my head gave her reply.

"It says 'I'm wearing my old witch's clothes, and they don't fit.'"

I sighed. It would have to do, though. I also raided what remained of her makeup for some mascara, blush, and a light pink lipstick that made me look a little more put together than I felt.

Dressed, I slipped back out of the house with no one noticing. I assumed they were in the garage looking through Winnie's spell books and other such things.

I knocked on Charlie's door since I didn't have magic to let myself in, and Charlie opened it. He grinned when he saw me and shouted, "Lads, our date's come to pick us up."

I rolled my eyes as I walked past him into the house.

"Not so fast." He snaked his arm around my waist and pulled me against his chest. His lips were on mine in a flash, and I bit his lip. He pulled away. "What was that for?"

"I just put on lipstick, and you're going to ruin it." It had nothing to do with the fact I felt sick to my stomach.

Just get there, sit down, tell them everything, and hopefully all this worry will be for nothing and they will be the supportive bonds you wish them to be.

Zaide and Baelen smiled as they joined us. Zaide took my hand, and Baelen kissed my cheek as Charlie picked up his keys and shouted up the stairs to Daithi and Savida, “We’re going for dinner! See you later.”

* * *

WE ARRIVED at the restaurant half an hour later, but I had barely opened my mouth to speak in the car and on the short walk. The men chattered away, oblivious since I had kept our bonds locked down since last night and they therefore couldn’t feel the anxiety rolling in my stomach.

By the time the server had seated us at a booth by the window, I was sure my skin had a green tinge. The smell of the food didn’t stir my hunger, just my dread. I sat in the corner with Zaide next to me when I realized I was opposite Baelen and Charlie. Looking Baelen in the eyes to talk was going to be … difficult.

It’s all in your head. Everything will be all right. They love you.

We took the menus handed to us by our server, and when she left, I began, interrupting the easy conversation the men were having.

“I know you guys are planning to tell me off about what happened. I know I promised I wouldn’t put myself in danger anymore and that I wouldn’t keep things from you, and I’m really sorry that I’ve let you down, but before you start, I just want to explain everything because I can’t continue keeping secrets anymore.”

“You’re going to tell us here?” Charlie asked, his face dropping, and my guilt increased tenfold.

He probably just wanted a nice night with us, some good food, and a moment’s peace.

I did too. But I couldn’t guarantee when I’d have another vision, and I didn’t want them to find out before I’d told them.

I looked at the table as I muttered, “It’s away from everyone else and public so no one can react poorly.”

“You expect us to get that angry?” Baelen asked.

“I know you will,” I whispered.

Zaide squeezed my hand. “As Charlie once said, there’s nothing we cannot forgive. Whatever your secrets are, they are ours, and we will deal with them.”

The waitress interrupted, “Can I get you some drinks?”

I hadn’t even looked at my menu. “Just water for me.”

I didn’t hear what the others had told her. I just willed her away with every fiber of my body so I could relieve myself of the tension and secrets.

“Continue, Sunlight. You aren’t going to eat as distressed as you are.”

“Speaking of eating, you’re going to look strange if you don’t order something, Baelen. Order me a mac and cheese, and I’ll swap plates with you once I’ve finished my steak. I’m starving.”

“Charlie, you won’t manage all that,” I protested.

“I’m a dragon now. We have a big appetite. It’s going to do havoc to my shopping bill, but it might be worth it.”

Zaide exclaimed, “Well, I’d also like another dish.”

“Order something as a side, then. Maybe get a few. The garlic potatoes look amazing.”

“Gentlemen,” I hissed. “I’m trying to explain something, and you’re not even trying to listen.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Charlie said, dropping the menu. “I just like to make sure we have our orders straight so we can get them in ASAP.” He offered me a sheepish smile. “What are you having?”

I sighed. “Probably Shepard's pie.”

“Good choice.”

The waitress came back with our drinks and placed them on the table. “Are you ready for food?”

Charlie read out the orders, and I placed my hands around the glass of cold water, taking deep breaths before assuring myself again.

It’s going to be fine. They love you. They will not hate you.

I didn’t understand why I was so nervous to tell them.

Perhaps I feared breaking my promise to them since any infraction of the rules in the past was punished with a beating.

Perhaps I didn’t want the confrontation because in that same past, my words had been twisted and used against me.

They aren’t your parents. They definitely aren’t Fafnir. It’s fine. Calm down.

I took a sip of my water and started, “Do you remember when I started my period in the cabin?”

“Yes.”

“Absolutely.”

“And I saw the flash of our children.”

“Yes.”

“I assumed it was Nisha who sent me the vision of them since we’d been in constant communication, and then when she was there guiding me through visions of Fafnir’s life so I could understand more about his past, I thought it was all her.”

I swallowed thickly. “But she told me recently that she is dying, and the curse of seeing the future, the power of the Fates themselves, is being transferred. To me. The visions I saw were mine, not hers. She is slowly seeing less and less and teaching me how to control the power.”

Baelen’s eyes flashed red, and I knew he was about to explode, but I needed to explain everything before he yelled at me. “Please let me finish. I promise you’ll get to speak, but I need to tell you everything.”

“There’s more?”

“Last night, after she told me, I went to speak to Daithi because I know what a curse this is and how it affects both your mother and Daithi and how it will affect us. I wanted advice. But then I had a vision. On my own. Properly. And I saw the dragon attacking us on the top of the office building and knew I had to do something. Rather than telling you, because I knew you would all question me, I manipulated us into what I thought would be the best position to save us but didn’t succeed. The protector died.”

“Little Cat, this is all?”

The waitress interrupted with our food, and as she set the steaming Shepard’s Pie in front of me, I bit my lip to stop from screaming.

All I wanted was to get this off my chest. All I wanted was to tell them because the secret itched under my skin like a poisonous leaf reaction. My bonds dug into their food, except Baelen, who stared at me waiting.

“No. There’s more. I also had another vision after we killed the dragon. Fafnir swore revenge on me for sabotaging the hunter compound, and I learned that the dragon, the same dragon I just killed, was actually Fafnir’s dragon. He no longer has a dragon. He’s separated the two.”

I took a deep breath and gulped some water, racking my brain for anything else I needed to confess. “That’s everything, I think.”

“Are you going to eat something now?” Charlie asked.

I looked at the food, and my stomach growled so loud that I could have sworn that the table next to us looked over. “Perhaps in a moment.”

Charlie was on his way to finishing his plate while eyeing the side dishes he’d ordered. Zaide had eaten slowly with one hand while his other hand gripped mine firmly. Baelen was glaring.

“This is what you feared was unforgivable?” Zaide asked, his voice low and calm.

“I hope it's not unforgivable, but I know it’s more bad news on top of a bad situation and a worse-looking future. I’m sorry.” My gaze met Baelen’s, and I said, “I’m sorry because I know how much this is going to hurt and upset you, and the last thing in the world I want to do is cause you pain. I love you, and if I could undo this, if I could save your parents and push this curse back so it didn’t touch you again, I would. But with everything else that’s going on, I can’t do that right now.”

I hoped that there would be some kind of forgiveness in his eyes, some kind of light that told me he understood and forgave me, but all I could see was anger. I swallowed.

He won’t hurt me. He’s angry, but he won’t hurt me. Not all anger means pain.

But that’s not true. Emotional pain is still pain.

CHAPTER 9

BAELEN

The phrase “seeing red” had always been a literal thing for me. Blood threads appeared in my sight when I was angry and less disciplined.

It had been years since I truly lost control, since I saw red, all the thin lines which pulsed like veins … but I saw them at that moment.

I lost control.

I hit my limit.

It became too much.

Seeing my fathers again since they kicked me out of their palace and learning of their impending deaths had been tempered by learning I had soul mates. Ones I could confide in.

Yet before I could come to know them or meet them in person, my body was invaded, violated by the shadow king, and forced to follow his bidding, I hurt Zaide and placed Clawdia in danger as her power was used to open the shadow portal once more.

I’d held my nerve throughout all the chaos, concentrated on the task at hand, and supported my mates as best I could.

And now this.

My fathers—I knew they were dying, but I hadn’t had the time to consider that effect on my mother. Nor on her curse.

Now my mate would betray me, lie, and manipulate me as I had been my entire life, as if I were a pawn in a game. The helplessness was too much to bear.

Am I to be forced to live the same hellish life of my fathers? Never to enact change, never to trust my beloved, never to find peace in my

relationship with my parents?

Logically, I knew it wasn't her fault, but it didn't stop my fury. She understood me too well and was correct in assuming I'd be furious. I couldn't help the anger that surged to the surface.

I growled. "You've been having visions because my mother is dying and passing her curse onto you."

"Yes," she whispered.

I could see she was frightened, and yet I couldn't feel guilt for it. My akari instincts had taken over, my eyes sharpening into those of a predator, and with her quivering lip and tearful eyes, she looked weak. Like easy prey.

Zaide spoke, but my gaze didn't shift from her. "How long have you known, Little Cat? About the visions?"

"Not until the day we returned to the office. Before, I believed it was all her. I didn't know she was ill…" She cast me a cursory glance but quickly looked away. "I promise, I've told you at the first opportunity. When we aren't in danger and we can … process."

"Why are you the one getting her power? Why not Baelen?" Charlie asked.

I clenched my fists. "She is female. Fate is female."

I didn't want the power. I knew the curse it was, but yet again, I was being undercut by my soul mates for positions that rightfully should be mine. Savior of the titans was bestowed by my fathers upon Zaide, and now Clawdia would be Fate.

And I am their useless akari mate.

"Fate?" Charlie asked, confused.

Zaide's eyes widened with understanding. "Your mother isn't an akari seer. She's Fate?"

"Like the creepy one-eyed ladies from Hercules? Controller of destinies, seer of all?" Charlie asked, but none of us understood the question.

"The Fates were three powerful female titans until my mother. Now Clawdia."

Clawdia nodded, her lips twisted into a grimace. "I can't do anything to stop it, and neither can she. She can't help that she's sick."

"This transfer is complete when she dies?" Zaide asked.

“We don’t know for certain, but I’m being shown more and more things, and she less,” she said quietly. Silence descended upon us like a shroud, and Clawdia stirred her food into an unrecognizable mess, still not having a bite. “Baelen, please say something.”

“You look like you want to murder the chips. Express yourself like a grownup,” Charlie nudged me, and I growled at him. He pretended to shake and pulled a face. “Oh, scary vampire. Please don’t eat me.”

“I would sooner choke on this slop,” I sneered.

“Wow. He’s big mad.”

“Charlie.” Clawdia admonished softly. Turning to me, she licked her lips before asking, “Can you tell me how you are feeling?”

“I’m on the cusp of losing control, and I don’t want to say anything I might later come to regret.”

“I understand that, but I’d rather you say something rather than nothing.”

“Emotionally constipated,” Charlie coughed.

“I could pluck the blood from your veins in a heartbeat.”

“Talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

“Baelen, did you think—? Had you realized—?”

“That my mother was going to die along with my fathers? No. And while our relationship is strained, to say the least, I’m—”

Zaide finished my sentence for me. “Understandably upset to hear about her death.”

“She wants to see you.” Clawdia said, “I can tell you where to find her. The portals are open. You can go straight there, and maybe she’ll be able to reassure you more than I can.”

I laughed. It was a cruel, loud, furious laugh that wiped the hope from her eyes. “Now she’ll see me? Now that she’s dying. So she can assure me that her curse will no longer haunt me as it has my entire existence. The very reason she left me, the very reason she remained hidden until now, the reason my fathers hated me was because of that curse. Her power. And now I must continue to live with it?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “She’s missed you as you’ve missed her. I know you are angry—”

I hissed. “You seem to know everything now, Clawdia. Even my reaction to this conversation seems preordained. I’m to be confined to live or die by your words. You will keep your secrets, control us like your

puppets, as you have already done, and then we will become so resentful and angry that we can barely stand to be in the same room. And our children will end up like me."

And could there be a worse fate for a child to end up so bitter, so lonely and so desperate for connection, affection, and approval that, despite everything, they would continue to do a duty they would receive no thanks for?

Fearful faces of rescued titans flashed in my mind. Few were glad to see me stride across the training camp. Most froze as though I wouldn't be able to see them if they didn't move. Mumbled words of thanks didn't make up for the fear.

"It's not her fault. You know this," Zaide said.

My gaze snapped to him, and I opened my mouth to sneer something equally sharp and cruel, but Clawdia interrupted softly.

"I understand this is triggering for you, but this situation is different. You were a child dealing with a mother who controlled you and who was controlled by her visions. She was doing what she thought best to get the best outcome. Often, it is only upon reflection of the past and the consequences of actions where one might realize their faults and flaws in this. Even seeing the future doesn't mean a happy outcome, and she knows that more than any."

"You aren't telling me anything I don't already know."

"You aren't a child anymore. I'm not your mother. Now you know, and I want to talk to you about the visions. I want your help in deciding the best course of action for us. I want your support because I don't know what I'm doing, Baelen. Seeing things … It's scary."

Zaide's arm wrapped around her pulled her close to him. "We are here, Little Cat. We will support you in this."

She blinked rapidly but didn't move her gaze from mine. I said nothing.

I didn't know if I could support her. Rage from the injustice and a sadness like grief battled for supremacy inside me. Grief at losing my parents, losing my easy budding relationship with my mates, losing trust in her, it was pure pain.

At that moment, I couldn't express any of it, couldn't do anything but stare, trembling with my jaw clenched.

"I can't speak about this anymore." I stood up and began walking out of the restaurant. I didn't know where I was going, only that I needed to be

away. Humans milled around but looked like nothing more than red laces, and my hands were on the cusp of growing claws.

“Baelen,” Zaide called as he caught up to me. “Where are you going?”

“Away,” I growled, accidentally flashing my fangs. He didn’t flinch.

“I will walk with you.” His long strides matched mine as I moved blindly through throngs of humans in a brightly lit space that made my eyes and head hurt.

“I don’t want you to. You are only going to calm me down and talk me into forgiving her.”

He responded calmly. “What is there to forgive? She’s been forced to accept your mother’s curse. She has no choice in this.”

I stopped to control myself as rage flared brightly like a strike of lightning. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand this is clearly trauma talking, and when you’ve had time to calm down, I think you’ll realize that this is all just a terrible circumstance of Fate. But we will get through it.”

“Fate,” I spat. “My mother is Fate. Clawdia is turning into Fate. The circumstance is them. They see and control the threads of the past, present, and future. If I’m angry at Fate, then I’m angry at them.”

Zaide grasped my arm and pulled me into a stairwell. “If they could control this, Clawdia would not have this power and neither of them would cause you suffering. Having such power doesn’t make them all-knowing or all-powerful. They can’t control this, and they can’t control the universe, as you seem to believe.

“They see the threads, they manipulate, but there are rules which are beyond them. You know this. Both of them love you, and if either of them could spare you pain, you know they would. You are wounded from your past, but once you’ve calmed—”

“Calmed.” I seethed. “You have no right to tell me how to feel or what I understand. Leave me be.”

I tried to push him away but stumbled back against the cold stone wall of the stairwell. Zaide followed, his body pressing against mine, pinning me in place. The heat of him seeped through my clothes, a stark contrast to the chill at my back. Fury and fear controlled me. I fought him, but perhaps some part of me recognized that hurting him would kill us, so despite my blind rage, I didn’t fight hard.

He caught my wrists, slamming them against the wall above my head, and suddenly, that anger turned to lust.

“Stop.” And I did, because for the first time, he stared at me with fury in his purple eyes. “You are spiraling, and I won’t stand back and watch you ruin your relationships. We’ve gone through too much for you to run away now.”

“I’m not running,” I hissed.

All I wanted was space to think, to organize my thoughts so I could respond reasonably when they asked for my emotions instead of feeling as though I was speaking around sand in my mouth.

“No. You aren’t. Because I won’t let you.”

His breath ghosted across my face, warm and sweet, as he leaned in closer. The tension between us crackled like lightning, electric and dangerous. I could feel every point where our bodies touched—his hands gripping my wrists, his chest pressed against mine, his thighs trapping me against the wall.

In my encounters with others, male or female, I was the dominant one. Despite Zaide’s size and strength, I had assumed it would be the same for us. Clawdia had suggested I had a desire for control when she learned of my proclivities, and she knew me better than I knew myself because despite the thrum of lust underlying my the closeness of our bodies, I didn’t enjoy the confines.

After feeling so helpless, after opening a wound about being manipulated by everyone in my life, I didn’t want to feel restricted with my other mate.

“You think you can control me, too?” I growled, struggling against his hold, but Zaide was stronger. His fingers tightened around my wrists until I gasped. Then he released me, staying close to me as I took heaving breaths.

“So, this is about control,” he murmured, his hand traced soothing patterns on my arms as he spoke. His eyes softened. “I’m sorry. I’ve gone about this wrong.”

My heart thundered in my chest, a wild drumbeat of anger and desire. Confusion fogged my mind. *I need…*

“Take it back,” he whispered. “I understand now, and you can take it back.”

I didn’t understand. The strangeness of the situation had taken all the anger out of me, and I asked, bewildered, “Take what back?”

Zaide’s eyes locked with mine, intense and unwavering. “The control. It’s yours.”

Slowly, deliberately, he lifted my hands and placed them around his own wrists. The skin there was warm and soft, his pulse fluttering beneath my fingers like a caged bird. I could feel the strength in his arms, the coiled power just beneath the surface, yet he held himself perfectly still.

“You feel powerless,” he murmured, “trapped by fate and circumstance. So, take back what control you can. Here. Now. With me.”

The air between us seemed to shimmer, thick with unspoken possibilities. I tightened my grip on his wrists, feeling the bones shift beneath my palms. Zaide didn’t resist, didn’t pull away. He remained motionless, his breath long and controlled, but the black of his eyes dilated.

Fear or arousal?

He willingly submitted to my grasp, giving me what I needed despite his nervousness with an akari male. Yet he, like Clawdia, gave their all to love. It was a heady sensation, one that sent a thrill down my spine.

In a flash, I had him pinned against the wall, pushing his palms flat against it as my gaze narrowed in on my prey and lust clouded everything.

I leaned in closer, placing my hands on either side of his head, my lips hovering over his. “You don’t know what you’ve just asked for,” I whispered.

“If it soothes your pain, I’m willing to do anything.”

This male. This titan. My soul mate. So self-sacrificing but exactly what I needed.

Without breaking eye contact, he slowly leaned forward until our lips met. The kiss was gentle at first, a tentative exploration of each other’s mouths. But soon it deepened into something more passionate. My fangs grazed his lip, and blood bloomed in my mouth.

We groaned in unison, and as my cock hardened and my hips twitched, I knew staying here was not an option.

Without opening my eyes, without informing Zaide, I channeled my power into the wall, opening a glowing blue portal that quickly swallowed us up and deposited us at the bottom of Charlie’s bed.

Zaide, without a wall to steady him, fell backward, his eyes widened with alarm until he hit the softness of the bedding and realized where we were.

He could have stopped us. There was a moment when he looked at me and I him, and we both knew we could end whatever we started. But Zaide surged up, his hand curving around my neck and head as he pulled me toward him. The purple glowing scars on his body seemed to pulse with the blood in my cock.

I slid my hands down Zaide's body until I reached for the hem of his shirt, and ripped it off, revealing his golden muscles tense with anticipation but rippling under my touch and glowing scars that made shadows dance across his skin.

I wanted to explore every inch of him, to trace every line, to know every part of him. To own him. And he'd given me permission to take control.

I pulled back from the kiss, my lips swollen and tingling. Zaide's eyes were dark as he looked up at me, his gaze following my tongue as I licked my lips.

"Do you want this?" I asked, my voice low and husky.

"Yes," he breathed, leaning in to capture my lips once more while he tugged at my shirt. I helped him pull it over my head between gasping and urgent kisses.

"Then you obey me," I whispered against his lips before trailing kisses down his jawline and neck.

Our hands roamed over each other's bodies, stoking our lusts even higher. His rough palms touched me unlike any male I'd been with before. They were larger and textured with scars. Akari males valued their beauty, and scars like Zaide's wouldn't be borne. Yet they hypnotized me. Each line mapped his strength, gave glimpses of his hard battle for freedom, and invited me to follow them to hidden places.

When he ground his hips against mine, the bolt of desire was enough to make me dizzy. I moaned. I knew from Charlie's teasing that Zaide was proportional in size, but I wasn't afraid. No. It made me hungry in a way blood couldn't satiate. The feel of his cock, long and thick, pressing desperately against his trousers made me shudder with need.

His hesitant touches sent shivers down my spine, and I arched into him, craving more of him against me. But Zaide kept moving lower until he reached the waistband of my bottoms.

He hooked his fingers under the fabric and pulled them down just enough for my cock to spring free. He wrapped his hand around it without hesitation, and I groaned as his warm and tight fist began pumping me.

“Is this the first cock you’re touching other than your own?” I asked huskily as I unbuttoned him.

“Other than my own, it will be the only cock I touch,” he replied, his voice strained with desire.

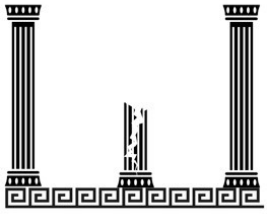
I shuddered at his words, feeling an intense rush of possessiveness.

Good answer.

But I didn’t want his touch as much as I wanted to own him, to establish control, to assert dominance. He was mine. No twist of fate nor shadow possession would take him from me. It was time to cement our bond, to be soul mates in every way. I just hoped the first thing I felt from my new bond wasn’t regret.

CHAPTER 10

ZAIDE



Baelen’s body was what artisans pictured when they created nude sculptures of warriors. As he straddled me, his muscles were hard and tense yet lay under skin soft to the touch, unblemished and beautiful.

His cock was no exception. Tall and proud, it stood to attention, pulsating with want. It jumped when I gripped it firmly, and when I pumped, although dry and unpracticed, Baelen’s breath hitched.

I smiled, recognizing the reward.

My jerking hand nudged my cock as it strained against my trousers, further fueling my desire. I stared at the reddened head as it wept. My thumb grazed the liquid, and my mouth watered.

“Hands off my cock. Hold the headboard, and don’t touch me again unless I allow it.”

Baelen’s command sliced through the charged air. His voice was deep, a growled whisper, and I shivered with anticipation and need.

From the moment I’d met Baelen, he tested my newly awakened sexual desire. He challenged my fears and prejudices and changed my perspective on strength. My feelings for him were complicated, yet touching him, kissing him, felt like I’d won a battle I hadn’t realized I was fighting.

Past victories in the fighting pits were tinged with regret, but I couldn’t regret this.

As he roamed my chest, leaving trails of fire in his wake, I stared up at him, watching his heavy-lidded red eyes as they admired me. I wanted to

hear what he was thinking. I wanted to feel his emotions through our bond. I wanted to know him entirely.

More than anything, I wanted to make him feel more in control than he did after Clawdia's confession. He needed that.

Reluctantly, I released my grip on his hardness and lifted my hands to press my palms flat against the cool wood of the headboard. The restraint was symbolic more than anything—no bindings held me, as I expected he knew that would be a trigger for me. Yet the act of submission, of giving myself over to the experience of him, was both thrilling and terrifying.

His hands raked over my chest, and he pinched my nipple, causing me to gasp. My hips bucked involuntarily, and my clothed cock ground against his freed one.

"So responsive," he murmured approvingly.

Then his mouth was on mine, hot and demanding, and all thoughts fled. I melted into the kiss, letting him take control, surrendering to the force that was my soul mate. His mouth trailed from my lips to my jaw and then my neck. His fangs grazed my skin as he moved down my body, but for the first time, that didn't concern me, I was too lost in sensation to fear.

Baelen's gaze flickered with something primal as he deftly unbuttoned my trousers. The fabric scraped over my legs, and the sound of our uneven breathing seemed to fill the room with tension. As the trousers fell away, leaving me exposed, my cock sprang to attention and trembled under Baelen's intense scrutiny.

I want him … so much.

I didn't get around to reading a book on male sexual experience. I felt underprepared and wasn't sure exactly how far our desire would take us, but regardless of the how, I wanted it.

"Perfect," he murmured, his eyes reflecting the red hues of passion and power while he kneeled before me. His touch was light but assured as he wrapped his hand around my considerable size.

His praise warmed my cheeks. He'd seen me naked before, of course, but having his attention concentrated on me, his gaze fixed and his expression hungry, made everything more intimate and meaningful.

"Forgive me if this isn't as skilled as you expect. I haven't done this before."

I gasped when he kissed the tip of my cock. As he licked and sucked the shaft, I trembled, but he was careful that his fangs didn't graze the sensitive

and fragile flesh.

Every movement he made was deliberate, his eyes watching my every tremor, and he adjusted accordingly. My eyes were narrowed to slits, my fists clenched around the slats of the headboard, my breathing hard and my muscles quivering with the effort to remain still, to not thrust into the heat of his mouth.

Gods. It was torturous … yet my pleasure only grew with the tension.

He lifted his naked body like a statue towering over me, then gripped my cock in one hand, his in the other, lazily tugging both.

“Do you want more, Sunset? Do you want our bond?” *Do you want me?* was left unspoken, but I heard it nonetheless.

Did I want another bond which cemented my family, which made us more powerful, which gave me the future with children? More importantly, did I want to show how much I cared for this male? Someone who was patient with my trauma, protective, and vengeful so I didn’t need to be?

I’d be a foolish male to not want that for eternity.

“Yes.”

Something flickered in his red eyes, and without warning, he changed position, straddling my face, and the view he presented made me gasp. His cock leaked onto my neck, heavy balls rested on my chin, and his puckered hole winked at me in the fading light.

“Lick my hole,” Baelen commanded. “Get me wet and ready for your cock, because I’m going to ride you.”

The image he created made me moan as he dipped back to my cock and swallowed me deep. Then I choked. Lust overwhelmed me, pulling me close to the edge of climax, but I dug my nails into my hands, and the pain distracted me enough that I could begin my own attack.

With a reverence that bordered on worship, I traced my tongue around the sensitive skin before daring to venture further. Baelen’s breath hitched, and his cock twitched, but he didn’t falter as he continued to suck and tug on my cock.

I wanted to run my hands over his body, feel his skin, and part his cheeks, but touching him when he told me not to, especially when he felt powerless, wouldn’t be received well.

Yet he surprised me.

“That’s right, Sunset,” he groaned as I plunged my tongue deep. His breath caressed my cock as he whispered, “Now use your fingers.”

I did as instructed, releasing my grip on the headboard to smooth my hands over his bronze skin. I pressed a finger gently against his hole to find it wet and stroked the textured skin in awe.

When I pressed more firmly, my finger was welcomed easily into his body, and Baelen let out a long moan and rested his head on my thigh.

A buzz of exhilaration darted under my skin, and although he was on top, was the one with the experience, I had my own power here. The power to please.

After a few thrusts with one finger, I added another, and his hole stretched as though made for me. Focused on making him lose control even for a moment, I twisted and pumped my fingers until Baelen let out a whimper and his cock jumped. Curious, I repeated the movements and found that pressing on a particular spot made him shudder and cry out.

I wanted to continue playing with this new discovery, but Baelen, panting and with eyes almost black with desire, climbed off my head and shoulders and straddled my legs. “Sneaky mate, but I don’t want to come before I have you inside me,” he panted.

“Can you take me?” I asked.

Although naïve to the workings of male sex, I knew his hole wasn’t as flexible or wet as it should be to take me comfortably. I didn’t want to hurt him with my size and ruin our first time.

Why hadn’t Charlie given me a book to study this?

Baelen smirked down at me. “You are the largest male I’ve ever been with, but I don’t mind if it hurts a little.”

He placed my cock at his entrance, and I bit my lip as, with deliberate slowness, he sank down onto my cock and his body stretched to accommodate me. He hissed a little, and a flicker of pleasure-pain danced across his features. I almost stopped him despite being so overwhelmed with pleasure that I couldn’t breathe.

But then our bond triggered, and I could feel him. And he could feel me. Our pleasure combined, and we groaned as he took the last few inches of my cock. He paused, breathing hard, before leaning down to kiss me softly.

I wrapped my arms around his back and tangled my fingers in his curls as our kiss intensified and our bodies moved together in small, slow movements. He lifted from my lips long enough to whisper, “You’re mine now. Forever.”

“I’m yours, and you’re mine. Mates. For all eternity.” I smiled widely, allowing him to feel all the affection, all the happiness and the excitement beating in my heart, and although his emotions didn’t feel as clear as Clawdia’s, I could sense appreciation and desire pouring back.

He kissed me once more and then moved. The tightness of his hole around my cock made my vision blur at the edges, the exquisite friction sending tremors through my frame.

I tried to ignore the bond echoing with our pleasure because I wanted this to last, but as I stared down my body to see Baelen’s cock weeping on my stomach and my cock thrusting in and out of his hole, the flexing of his muscles and the bliss on his face, I knew I wouldn’t last much longer. The sight was so erotic that it pushed me to the edge of climax.

The room seemed charged with energy as our shared ecstasy built to a crescendo. With one last thrust and a roar, we spiraled into climax together. My mind went white as pleasure consumed me, and Baelen’s own orgasm burst from his cock onto my chest in white spurts.

It was then that I pictured how Clawdia could join us in the future. It seemed a waste for his life-giving liquid to sit useless on my chest when she could be on his cock and taking it into her body.

I smiled to myself, excited to suggest it ... once she and Baelen set aside their differences.

Baelen winced as he unseated himself.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I’ll heal with some sleep.” He waved a hand.

Again, I heard what was unsaid. Perhaps it was louder now that we were bonded. “You would heal faster with blood.”

“I’m fed.”

I translated again. “You could have more.” I tilted my head, baring my neck to him. “Take it.”

He shook his head, looking at the bedsheets. “I need to clean up.”

“Stay there.” I told him firmly and left the room to grasp a wet cloth and returned to wipe him down. I settled myself back on the bed and pulled Baelen to lie across me. “I will clean you as you drink.”

His eyes assessed mine. “You’re sure?”

“We are bonded.” I whispered and then kissed his forehead. “I can feel your emotions, and your bite is pleasurable. I’ll be more than fine.”

He sank his teeth into my neck, and I sighed with the pleasure of it, relieved I didn't feel any anxiety and, therefore, neither did Baelen. As he lapped at my skin and pulled at the blood beneath the surface, I could feel what he experienced. The pride, gratitude, desire, and hunger sated with every pull.

I found joy in providing for my mate as he fed on my blood and I mopped up our mess.

When I found Clawdia and our bond gave me peace within my soul that I'd prayed for my entire existence, I thought it couldn't get any better than that. But Fate had always been on my side and gifted me her only child. A soul mate. And while our path had been rocky, our journey not as simple as when I reunited with the other half of my soul, I was so grateful.

This bond was everything.

I tossed the washcloth and closed my eyes, exploring the bond with my mind's eye. It was bronze, like his skin, and just as dazzling to behold. Power raced along it, and I could sense Clawdia's bond on the other side of it. Not my bond with her, but his. Our bonds formed a triangle together, sharing power, emotions, and thoughts. It was beautiful. And when Clawdia unblocked her bonds, we'd be much stronger for it.

"Are you crying?" Baelen asked. I hadn't felt him release me, but when I opened my eyes to meet his concerned gaze, he asked, "Did I hurt you?"

I laughed, feeling light and unashamed as I wiped the lone tear from my cheek. "No. I'm not hurt. You can feel that. I'm overwhelmed with joy. We are as we've always meant to be."

His cheek twitched, and his mood soured, making the beautiful new bond between us sag with weight. I rolled onto my side and cupped his face. "I know the idea of destiny feels wrong to you, but for me, having our bond feels like a sign from the great forces that we are on the right path and are going to be looked after."

"Your faith is admirable."

It was getting easier to untangle the truth from his words. I smiled to lessen the sting. "You don't admire it."

He huffed and pursed his lips before eventually saying, "I admire your strength of mind to continue positively and hopefully despite all the despair. But you're right. I find the idea of faith ridiculous."

"Your fathers are gods. Your mother is Fate. They are great powers within our realms, and you've seen the worst of them. You've seen the

humanity behind the masks, so of course faith is something you struggle with." I stroked a curl away from his face, tucking it behind his ear. "But you believed in your mother's gift enough to follow her instructions to not seek her out and to save the titans."

I felt his mood darken even further. "I did, but it was a lie. A manipulation. I was never supposed to be the savior of the titans. I held that space for you, and my mother abandoning me to my father's only left me with…" He clenched his fist over his heart.

My mate struggles to express himself, so I'll do it for him.

"You were left with anger, betrayal, lack of self-worth, and a desire to please for attention, positive or negative. Trauma," I told him softly. "And I can see why you'd conflate the trauma of your childhood with your mother's visions and Fate. But you are the savior of titans because you have been saving them. You'll never see the future your mother did, which caused her to make such a decision, and therefore, you'll never know if you would have made the same one with that knowledge. You were a child, Baelen, and she was your mother, balancing your wellbeing with the future of the realms. I'm sure it wasn't easy."

"Understanding that doesn't stop me feeling…"

He paused again, and I nodded. "Your feelings are valid, logical ones, but I want you to let them go because anger doesn't serve you. Or us. We need to be united if we are to do as we need to."

"You take pleasure in knowing our future is planned for us? By our love?"

I shrugged. "I trust her. You stopped trusting your mother to make decisions for you once they hurt you. But Clawdia is going to talk to us. She'll want our help and support, and she's going to do her best for us and our children."

Knowing they would also have such enormous fates didn't lessen my desire for them, but I understood that raising them wouldn't always be easy.

"It might not always feel like love to be forced to thrive under pressure, but I promise you it is."

"You are very wise."

"But you disagree." I laughed. "You often say neutral things when you mean something negative."

He huffed and tried to roll away. "I clearly don't need to speak anymore."

I kept him trapped in my arms, my gaze locked on his. “I’m your slave. Yours to command. I’ll be your mouthpiece if you need me to be.”

His gaze darkened, and he cupped my jaw as he leaned over me on an elbow. “While I appreciate you letting me sate my need for control, you are no slave, Sunset. You are a king in the making.”

He kissed me, full-bodied and ravenous, and my cock threatened to make a second showing, but he pulled away and tucked his head into the crook of my neck, our breathing uneven as the sky beyond the curtained window turned dark.

“I won’t be your king. Just your mate, your sunset.” I kissed his forehead. “Get to sleep, my mate. Things will seem better in the morning, and we will face our problems together. As a family.”

* * *

I COULDN’T SLEEP, but Baelen soon drifted off into a blissful slumber, his soft snores moving hair across my chest back and forth. Eventually, I gently moved my mate so I could leave the room and headed to the bathroom to wash up. I showered, hoping to feel better, but under the water, my thoughts swirled. My anxiety heightened as I reflected on the day.

Clawdia having the power of Fate could be the power that helps us win this battle against Fafnir, and also with our mission to save titans. But what would the cost be?

Now that I felt more settled with a bond to our soul mate, I was suddenly more aware of the silence from her. *What is she hiding from us? Does it hurt her to see visions? Is that what she is keeping from us?*

If it were only that she is trying to keep her secret, then there should be no more reason to keep the bond blocked. No reason not to contact us or see where we are … unless she saw us leave?

Have they even returned? What if something happened to them while I was too busy with Baelen to notice?

Guilt turned my stomach, and I rinsed quickly, resolving to find them and check they were well before going back to bed. Thankfully, as I shut off the water and rubbed a towel over my body to dry, the front door slammed shut. I hurried out to greet them.

“Zaide,” Charlie cheered as I peered over the stairs to see him in the living room. Clawdia wasn’t with him. “You made it back, then. We were wondering where you went.”

“Where’s Clawdia? I thought she might have seen us since she didn’t contact us.”

“Clawdia’s gone to bed.” He nodded toward the office. “She didn’t know where you guys went, and we spent hours walking around the shops looking for you both until we concluded you portaled back.”

“I’m sorry, my friend. I didn’t realize.” I paused. “How is she?”

He raised a brow. “Spent the car ride crying like the world was ending. Can barely see her eyes, they are so swollen. Baelen’s got a lot of making up to do.”

“Should I…” I wanted to check on her, to see her with my own eyes and assure myself she was okay, but I didn’t want to cause her more distress if I woke her up.

“She’s probably asleep. Don’t worry about her tonight. I think your soul mate needs a bit of TLC.” I frowned and tilted my head at the unfamiliar term. He clarified, “Tender loving care.”

“Ah. Yes. Well.” I rubbed my neck, and heat rose to my cheeks.

“Are you blushing, Zaide?” I glared, and he laughed. “Don’t be like that. It’s kind of cute. I take it you’re all bonded now?”

“Yes.” I nodded.

“Congratulations.” He smiled softly, and I responded in kind, glad to hear his honest support for our union.

Then a thought struck me. “If Clawdia is already in bed, where have you come from?”

He pointed his thumb to indicate the house next door. “I’ve just updated the task team leaders and Elizabeth on everything that happened and Clawdia’s update. We’re going to discuss it all tomorrow, but it’s clear they are making plans since they’ve dragged Lydia here.” He made a disgusted face, which forced a laugh from me. He continued with a sneer. “And after how helpful they were at finding you, I have no hope for whatever they are planning.”

CHAPTER 11

BAELEN

"Do you want any of this?" Charlie asked as I entered the kitchen in the morning.

He pointed at the food with his fork. Plates of various unrecognizable things sat on the counter, heat rising in swirls from them, and the smell reminding me of injured cattle.

There was much to learn about the human realm and yet no time to ask. I was loath to admit that I didn't know something.

"No," I told him as I eyed the food and he stabbed at his own plate. I didn't hear him come home the night before, nor did I hear him get up and prepare all the food, but he must not have rested well. His eyes were red. "Are we expecting guests?"

"Elizabeth is coming soon to explain plans. Plus, I haven't seen Daithi and Savida since yesterday morning. I'm not sure if they've eaten, so I hope they haven't turned into empty husks in my guest room."

"Who knew you were such a generous host?" I replied dryly.

Although it wouldn't surprise me if they weren't in the guest room at all and had fled since they could portal home now. Or even portaled back to the shadow realm to take the king up on his job offer.

"They were planning on paying me a fuck-load of money to travel around the world searching for Clawdia. I figure since I've already done both, I'm due a payment, so I need them alive. Although, I'm not sure how they were going to pay me, now that I think about it."

Zaide's hunger gnawed at our bond. He was in the shower but would be joining, so I began plating up some of the items for him. His emotions, like

his blood, had a darker, deeper tone to them than Clawdia's, but since Clawdia's bond was still silent as it had been since the protector's death, I appreciated the warmth of Zaide's bond.

I shrugged as I joined him at the table, placing Zaide's plate next to me. "Probably a valuable mineral of some kind. Payment in all realms is different. I doubt he would have had human money before he came here."

Charlie scoffed in disgust. "Of course it wouldn't be real money," he mumbled. "Doing free labor for nothing."

"Maybe not for nothing. If it is a golden mineral, Dralie might like it for his hoard."

"Are you sure you don't want any? I assumed you worked up quite the appetite after last night." He waggled his brows.

I leveled him with a glare. Despite Zaide's bond quelling my anger from the previous day's revelations, it still simmered in the back of my mind. I wasn't inclined to dispel it yet, either.

"You know I can't eat food."

He nodded, chewed, swallowed, and then asked, "What would happen if you ate some?"

"I'd be sick. My body can't consume anything but blood."

"Can you taste it? What if you spit it out?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Your curiosity is disgusting."

He held his hands up. "I'm just asking what everyone else wants to know. I speak for the people."

I rolled my eyes, giving in to his ridiculousness, and answered, "I could taste it, but it wouldn't taste pleasant to me."

He looked from his plate to me and back again. His smile was mockingly pitying. "Shame." He skewered his last few bites and, between groans of appreciation, said, "Because this is banging."

Zaide entered braiding his wet hair, and when he smiled, spotting us and the food, I felt his unreserved joy. My soul mate appreciated life, which I had lost while doing my duty. *Perhaps that is why I need him so much.* I felt much lighter.

Zaide pulled out the seat next to me, the scrape across the floor jolting me from reverie. "Another of the English's breakfast, Charlie?"

"You all seemed to enjoy it the first time." Charlie waggled his eyebrows again. "Baelen added a few extra things to your plate, so it's not exactly the same as before, but I know you aren't fussy."

Zaide’s gaze moved from his plate to me. His purple eyes widened, and his gratitude flooded our bond before he could say the word. “Thank you.”

“You fed me.” I cupped his jaw and pulled his lips to mine for a quick, gentle kiss. “I feed you.”

Charlie interrupted our moment. “Um, I was the one who cooked. Where’s my thanks? Praise? Loving stares?”

“I didn’t realize you were so bereft of my attention, Charlie. I’ll rectify that now. Thank you for feeding me. I appreciate your care for our family.” Zaide batted his eyelashes, his eyes wide and his head tilted.

Charlie burst out laughing. “Not going to lie, it still felt good.”

In moments like these, I saw how the rest of our lives could be. The playfulness, the care, the adoration and acceptance. I still had much to learn about my mates and even more to learn about Charlie, but I craved more of this ease, this happiness.

Clawdia shuffled into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes, and Charlie’s face softened at the sight of her. “Sit down, Clawdicat. Let me get you something to eat.”

“Fruit,” she mumbled. “Please. I need fruit. It’s been so long.”

Charlie chuckled and squeezed her shoulder before heading to the counter.

“Good morning, Little Cat. How are you feeling?” Zaide asked.

“Tired,” she replied with a small smile. Her eyes glanced at me for a second before flitting away. My eyes remained on Charlie as though I didn’t notice her gauging my mood.

Thankfully, as Charlie placed a plate of fruit in front of her, we were spared any awkwardness when Elizabeth called out a greeting from the front door. Like a whirlwind, she rushed into the kitchen, sat down, and barely took a breath before diving into the crux of the matter.

“The protector has been dead for two days, but we are already hearing of disappearances. I’ve been liaising with the council, who are talking to the governments and attempting to suppress the news to stop more panic and explain the situation.”

Elizabeth’s face was somber, and her eyes were as tired as her son’s. Her words pebbled my skin as an icy chill brushed over me, while Zaide’s jaw tightened and Clawdia gasped.

Only Charlie seemed immune to the loss of populace, and instead, his curiosity struck. “Wait, governments know about supernaturals?”

“You think they wouldn’t? Why did you think a dragon flying around Sweden didn’t get more news coverage?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow.

“And supernaturals aren’t in experimental camps or hunted by the government? That doesn’t sound like the human race.”

Her lips twisted. “I’m sure some of the hunters’ funding would come from people in power, however rarely can humans fix a supernatural-made problem. Which is why the council are eager for our plan.”

Charlie muttered before pressing the switch on the kettle. “I bet witches are mud with the governments at the moment.”

Elizabeth nodded. "Our reputation has most definitely taken a hit. Which can begin the spiral of self-hatred, misjudgment, and victimization. To ensure our people are not radicalized, we need to assure them this was not for naught and that they can achieve their goal of saving the realm by helping in our plan to right their wrongs."

In response to his birth mother’s question, Charlie rolled his eyes and sighed. “Are the feelings of witches really the top priority right now?”

I had to agree.

“We need plans for all things,” Elizabeth began. “We need to locate Fafnir and make sure the hunters are no longer a threat. However, this is something we can delegate as long as we have the right plan in mind. Baelen, you’ve been trying to protect the titans from slavers for years now. Do you have any ideas?”

Although I knew she meant no harm with her words, my dark mind and vulnerable state made me feel as though she’d flayed me. I cut her a sharp glance before saying, “I’ve used artifacts since my only power is in blood.”

“What are artifacts?” Elizabeth asked.

“Items with their own innate power. They are a kind of anomaly that occurs when the realm’s natural magic overflows. My fathers have the ones from the human realm, which they were instructed to take after the fall, and I have been collecting as many as I can find in other realms. My ring is an artifact with the power of invisibility.”

Charlie muttered, “I’d hate to be the one to find an artifact that explodes when touched.”

My lip curled. “There is a certain amount of consideration to take when handling artifacts. You should know the power, the history, and whether that history and record of power came from a trusted source.”

“What artifacts do you use to protect the titans?” Zaide asked.

“I use Omphalos stones for protection shields. When these are breached, a firebird feather turns red and alerts the occupants. I also have Eldhrimnir, a cauldron used to replicate whatever is inside it, which is how I’ve created more stones and feathers.”

Eyes bore into me, and silence descended. I felt heat creeping up my face.

“Greek and Norse words. But they were both titan owned?” Elizabeth asked.

I shrugged. “If your myths refer to gods, it’s likely the beings were titan or titan origin.”

“I’ve never heard of myths involving protection shields or a replica-creating cauldron,” Charlie added.

Leaning back in my chair, I explained, “The Omphalos was, according to legend, ordered by a god king to be dropped at the center of the world. It was dropped in a sanctuary where a seer lived and people of all realms pilgrimaged. Unknown to the humans, this sanctuary was protected by the stone, as portals couldn’t be opened within the surrounding area.”

“Like a ward?” Elizabeth asked

I nodded. “The key difference being that the Omphalos doesn’t waver in strength. Firebird feathers continue to cast light when removed, are bright enough to cover a vast area, and are sensitive to beings with ill will or intent to capture. I learned that placing them at the border of the Omphalos-protected area created a warning system whereby the feather flame turns red.”

Clawdia’s eyes were wide with awe. “Baelen, that’s incredible.”

“You are very creative, my mate,” Zaide added as he squeezed my thigh.

Pride filled my chest. My achievements with the titans had been a secret for so long, and other than Darshaw, I didn’t have any support who would celebrate me.

“Firebirds,” Charlie breathed. He leaned forward across the table, his eyes sparkling.

“You didn’t think a glowing bird would be from Tartarus?” I asked jokingly.

Zaide chuckled softly, his eyes glazed with memories as he said, “As I remember, they are very fond of the golden apples.”

“Dralie’s going to have fun chasing them away.” Clawdia nudged Charlie playfully.

“Dralie’s going to want to eat them. Do you think they taste like chicken?” Charlie asked.

Zaide was horrified. “Eat them? They are the sacred animal of Tartarus.”

“They are perfect for his hoard. He won’t eat them,” I assured him.

“I might,” Charlie muttered.

Zaide gasped. “You’ll be cursed.”

“Fine, I won’t eat the glowing chicken.” He rolled his eyes at Clawdia. “Honestly, the things I do for you lot.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes before pinning me with her stare and asking, “These warning systems are helpful? The people can defend themselves from the invaders?”

I shook my head. “There are very few titan settlements on Tartarus now, but they have quite the underground network to escape detection when given the warning. We also use the same system to protect the armies in Akar.”

“So, there is no defense plan.”

My fists clenched at her dismissive words. “There are not enough titans to defend Tartarus. I’ve visited the settlements and offered to move them to Akar for training to better protect themselves, but many refused. They are old, tired, and don’t want to leave the only home they’ve known, often the home they built and have memories of loved ones in. They’d rather hide. Our armies fight, but there’s no way for the army to come to the aid of the people when the army is in another realm.”

“Why is the army in another realm?”

I ran my tongue along my fangs as my frustration increased. “Because slavers are looking for titans in Tartarus and it’s harder to find them in other realms. They are safe while they train. Eventually, we’ll move back once the army has grown enough and we can properly defend the people.”

Elizabeth must have noticed my anger and grimaced apologetically. “I mean no offense. I’m just trying to relate it to our own situation. It seems you’re lacking in manpower, but we have that. Our spells or potions could replicate the firebird feathers and create wards. With enough of them, we could severely limit the number of portals appearing. Or we could force them all to certain areas, where visitors could be vetted.”

Charlie asked, “Is that why you dragged Lydia here? To help with potions for this ‘save the witch reputation’ campaign?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said and aimed a glare his way. “I didn’t realize you were so prolific in the witch community, Charlie. I thought you’d only just come into your heritage, but it seems you’ve never been too far from magic.”

He curled his lip in response. “I don’t know what you mean by prolific.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but I jumped in before the conversation descended into chaos.

“Your spells and potions may not be able to replicate the innate magic in the artifacts as the cauldron does. The cauldron was thought to bring back to life a beast which had been roasted for the gods. The gods wanted to eat it again the next night and so the cook used the cauldron. In truth, the beast was not brought back to life, but the meat was replicated.”

Zaide hummed thoughtfully. “It’s very interesting to hear how stories have changed throughout time.”

Charlie nodded. “Just think of how many times we’ve been told the story of Fafnir and Sigurd. Each time has been different. We still don’t know the truth about it. Probably never will now that he’s dead. Even Fafnir has relied on stories evolving over time until they’re distorted to hide his true nature. We just thought he was a dragon that ate magic at the start of all this.”

“Which is why Fate can see the past,” Clawdia added softly as she collected the plates. “So at least someone knows the truth.”

Elizabeth brought us back to topic. “If you don’t believe our spells or potions could recreate the stones and feathers, perhaps we could at least look at the artifacts to help us see the innate magic and determine whether we can touch it.”

“I can retrieve them, certainly.”

Clawdia had begun washing and suddenly turned around, her face alight with hope. “So, Lydia doesn’t need to be here?”

Elizabeth shot her a glare, and Clawdia sagged as she turned back to the sink. "As well as helping with our portal plan, Lydia will also help us create weapons and things that will hold his dark magic at bay. She’s a potions master and has good instincts, so we are in excellent hands."

Zaide got up, his hand leaving my leg, and joined Clawdia at the sink, picking up a towel and drying what she washed.

Charlie brought my attention back to the conversation. “We know nothing about dark magic. Unless you’re holding out on us again.”

“It’s forbidden to learn,” Elizabeth replied quickly.

Charlie let out a frustrated huff. “So we know nothing about it and you don’t want us to, but we need to defend against something we don’t understand? Make that make sense.”

“Forbidden things only make it easier for people with ill intent to use against unwitting others,” I added.

Elizabeth tilted her head. “No. Unfortunately, that is true. I know little about dark magic, but I know witches who know more.”

“Yeah,” Charlie drawled, exchanging an exasperated glance with me. “And they are on the other team.”

Elizabeth smirked. “I’m hoping they won’t be.”

Charlie frowned and sat up straighter. “You can create potions to make them good? Why didn’t we start with that? We could have had Fafnir dolling out soup to the homeless by now.”

“I’m afraid changing someone’s behavior so drastically would be dark magic,” she replied in a dry tone that reminded me of her son. “I have another plan for them, but I want us to start with the portals first, then the hunters, then the witches, then Fafnir. We’ll strip him of his allies before we take him down.”

Charlie chuckled. “Love this energy.”

“You will assist Lydia, Arabella, and myself with our plans. I want you to find out if Fafnir is still working with the hunters and if that’s why they attacked us. I’d also like your ideas for integrating technology into our magic.” She saw the disgruntled look on his face and continued. “I know you and Lydia have history, but I hope you won’t let it impede a working relationship for the greater good.” She turned to look at Clawdia, who was also pouting. “Clawdia, I am saying this to you too. Please do not chase Lydia away. We need all the help we can get.”

Clawdia looked pointedly at Charlie as she replied to Elizabeth, “I’ll be on my best behavior with Lydia, and I know Charlie will too. I trust him.”

Charlie swallowed and nodded once, hearing the threat in the seemingly innocent words. My lips twitched at the sight of his fear of her.

Elizabeth continued unperturbed, “Regarding Fafnir, he’s injured and angry. This is excellent. He’ll make mistakes. This is an opportunity to hit him while he’s down. If he can’t shift, he is mortal. He will be easy to kill.”

“You’ve had your Weetabix this morning,” Charlie added. “I’ve never seen you so determined.”

Again, Elizabeth ignored him. “Clawdia, I’m sure your visions are going to be essential to our victory. Please continue to work on your understanding and control of your new gift.”

Clawdia’s face fell, and Zaide wrapped an arm around her, tucking her against him.

Charlie slapped his knees. “Well, we’ve got our orders, and I’ve got a phone call to make, so send everyone round in a few hours once we’ve got our shit together.” As he guided Elizabeth out of the house, I heard him ask, “Where are Savida and Daithi? Why do they get out of hard work?”

* * *

I ARRIVED BACK in the dimness of Akar, in my bedroom in the palace, and my eyes adjusted to the dark, making me sigh with relief. Days in the human realm were better than days in Tartarus, but nothing felt as good as coming back home and being able to be my true self. I headed straight to my relic collection in the storage room next door and began routing around for what I needed.

I heard my uncle’s steps hurrying toward me long before his voice reached my ears. “Baelen? Is that you? Where have you been? What happened?”

I let out a humorless chuckle as I stood and greeted him. “It’s a long story.”

He frowned. “I have lived a long time. I’m in no rush.”

“You might not be, but I am.” I stooped again to collect the cauldron, feathers, and stones.

Darshaw leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed, disapproval written across his face. “Your soul mates are keeping you away from your family so soon?”

“They are currently attempting to save the human realm from the threat of a vengeful dark witch, supernatural hunters, and otherworlders who are invading and stealing their people. I can aid them in at least one of those matters.”

“But you didn’t bring them with you?”

I raised my eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you were so keen to meet them.”

“I have many stories to tell them of your youth.” I rolled my eyes, but a small smile curled the corner of my lip. His red eyes assessed me. “You don’t seem overjoyed with the blessings of a mate bond.”

I sighed. “You will not leave me alone until I tell you everything, will you?”

He smiled but said nothing. I headed to the kitchens, Darshaw walking with me as I explained everything. Shadows, hunters, capture, shadow realm, drakorians separated from their male, dark magic…

My voice was going hoarse when he passed me a glass of blood, but the smell of it turned my stomach. Nothing would compare to the taste of my soul mates’ blood.

When I was done, I noted the concern in his eyes. “That’s quite the adventure. I’m sorry you are under so much pressure right now, but your future has always been laden with responsibility. It’s a heavy mantle to bear. If I can help…”

“Don’t you have a kingdom to run?” I asked dryly.

His offer of help was always genuine but also out of sheer boredom. It was why he made such a game out of finding my mother and offered to let the titan army stay here. He enjoyed watching them develop like a livestock farmer enjoys surprise pregnancies.

He shrugged. “When you’ve been running a kingdom as long as I have, it runs itself.”

“There’s nothing you could do right now. I’m here to pick up a few things so the witches can help protect the human realm from invaders.” I rubbed my neck. “I do have other news. Recent news. Mother is dying. So are my fathers. Clawdia is taking on the curse of Fate.”

As the blood drained from his face, I quickly explained and watched as the anger turned his face back to normal color. I finished by saying, “You may need to be the voice of reason when I eventually speak to my mother and fathers, because I’m not being rational about it.”

His fangs dropped, and his fists clenched. “If she thinks she can die after leaving me for years without an apology or a goodbye, she is sorely mistaken. I’m afraid my voice may not be much more reasonable than yours, but I will be there. It’s time you spoke as a family instead of strangers.”

“I keep hearing that.”

His smile returned. “Someone very wise.”

“You’d like him.”

“I look forward to the day I meet them. And even more so the day you announce a child.”

I hesitated to mention it, but after everything he had done for me and knowing how much he longed to pass on his burden, I said, “Clawdia has already seen him. And his brothers and sister.”

“Four. One for each of you, I presume?” he chuckled.

“I’m not sure it’s on purpose.” My mood darkened. “As always, Fate pulls the strings.”

“Not a terrible thing when it’s in your favor.”

But I wasn’t sure how true that was.

CHAPTER 12

CHARLIE

With Baelen gone into the glowing, swirling blue portal on my kitchen wall, Clawdia's shoulders relaxed a little, and Dralie stopped yelling at the akari from inside my head.

I need to have another chat with him about indoor voices. Not that I blamed him.

I didn't like the way had Baelen deliberately ignored her, either. She seemed to sink into herself every moment he didn't look at her. I hadn't lived Baelen's life; I didn't know why he was so triggered by this news, but it was very "crybaby, me-me-me, only child" of him.

Clawdia was the one to gain a power so great and scary that three immortal titans used to do it. She was more scared now that her soul mate wouldn't support her. As she cried herself to sleep last night, I wanted to punch him in the bollocks, but more arguing and fighting was the last thing any of us needed.

Especially when Dralie and I were hiding our own discovery. Now definitely wasn't the time to reveal that.

"I'd prefer if we never mentioned it. Our mate will only hate us," Dralie whispered.

"She's only hateful when she's fluffy."

"Wake those lazy bastards upstairs, would you? I'm going to make a call," I told Clawdia and Zaide as I headed into the office, already pressing the green button on the screen of my phone.

I nodded along to the dial tone as the door shut behind me, and I waited for Adam to pick up. Once he did, I didn't waste time fucking around and

got right to it.

"You found him?"

Adam let out a satisfied huff, and I smiled. "I would not let that little prick think he got away with it, so I've got you a folder he was guarding with his life. I figure it's important since the surrounding security took me a good few days to detangle. I haven't accessed it since it might be a trap, so I don't know what's in it. But it's yours if you want it."

I punched the air. *Fuck yes. This could save me hours of work.*

Adam continued, "I'm satisfied with taking that and proving he didn't get the best of me. But I'm not getting involved any further. This is the last thing I do for you, Charlie. I've got to think about my business, and I can't have anyone taking it down like that again."

That dampened my enthusiasm, but I understood. "Totally fair. Send me the details securely, and I'll do the rest."

"No problem."

Despite us both being easygoing about everything, the pause felt awkward. Usually, I'd hang up. Or he'd hang up. But knowing that this might be the last time we spoke, I wanted to say … something.

"Hey, Adam, I really appreciate everything you've done for me, you know. Not just recently, but before. You're a good one. So, I just want to leave you with a word of wisdom. If you see a blue flash of light, head in the other direction like your arse is on fire. Tell your family to do the same. It's not aliens that'll get you, but it might as well be. Same for interacting with the arrow insignia people. Stay away from them too. They are bad news."

The silence on the other end had me checking to see if he'd hung up. He hadn't. Finally, he said, "Right. Well. Thanks for that."

I laughed. He probably thought I was a lunatic, and a few weeks ago I would have agreed, but he knew the rumors mentioned the blue light, so I knew he'd take the warning seriously. He just didn't know how to respond to my outburst. "Good luck out there. See you around."

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, I was looking through the folder the hunter hacker had been guarding. Adam was right not to look at it. It was booby-trapped to

high heaven. But I found a backdoor, which also got me a backdoor into the hunter's main server.

Sometimes my talent and brilliance shocked even me.

Clawdia entered the office, and without even thinking about it, I pushed my chair out from under the desk so she could sit on my lap as I continued to click, just like I used to when she was a cat.

"Where is everyone?" I asked as she curled up on my lap and I nuzzled into her hair.

"Daithi and Savida have gone back to the guest room after eating. Apparently, they've not been having as much sex as they'd like because of the stress of everything, so they are taking this interlude as a holiday until they are needed." We exchanged an exasperated glance before she continued. "Zaide has gone for a run. He is feeling rather useless at the moment."

"Is that a good idea?" I asked.

"He's promised to check in every few minutes," she replied, but the look on her face told me she was also uneasy about it.

"You've opened the bond back up? Why can't I feel you?"

"I've opened it to Zaide and you, but I can't feel you either. That's why I came in." Her hand stroked my neck, and her brow furrowed with worry. "Do you think I've damaged our bond by shutting it down? Is Dralie angry with me?"

"Never. Perhaps it is my betrayal which has broken us."

"Dralie says he thinks our bond is fine and functioning perfectly."

"That is not what I said."

"Do you want her to know or not?" I growled at my dragon. To Clawdia, I was the picture of calm. "Maybe the mate bond with Dralie has affected the familiar bond?"

She frowned. "Aren't they the same thing? I just assumed it strengthened the familiar bond."

I shrugged and smiled to reassure her. "Let's not worry about it right now. If Dralie's not concerned, I don't think we should be."

"I don't enjoy lying to her."

"It's not forever. Let's just deal with the current situation and confess later."

She smiled and rested her head against mine, her hand continuing to stroke the back of my neck, sending shivers down my spine. "I'll just have

to stick close so I know you're all right."

"I won't complain about that." I chuckled and squeezed her thigh before returning one hand to my mouse while my other hand stroked the side of her thigh.

She turned her attention to my screen. "What are you looking at?"

"Hunter shit."

She smiled proudly. "You always find what you're looking for."

"They've got profiles on all of us." I opened the information and showed her what I'd been scrolling through. "They've got the most correct information on Zaide, but the captive witches must have given them accounts of everyone else. Honestly, the witches are more trouble than they are worth."

"You are part witch, remember?"

"I don't claim that."

I gasped when I spotted what they'd written for my height. Five feet, seven inches. "I'm not that fucking short, you bastards. I'm fucking deleting that."

She chuckled, and I watched her face, feeling all warm and fuzzy. "This is kind of surreal, you know." Her brow raised questioningly, and her smile remained. "You sitting on my lap, me petting you like I used to pet you when you were just a cat. Only difference is you aren't purring."

Her eyes widened even further, and then a cheeky smile crept over her face. Her voice was husky and seductive when she whispered inches from my lips, "I can think of a few ways you can make me purr."

My dick twitched, and I closed the gap between us, kissing her hard.

"Are we interrupting something?" a familiar voice asked, laughter in his voice.

I cursed under my breath as we parted and looked toward the door where Arabella, Isaac, and Omaira stood, smirking.

"You were actually, so if you could just…" I shooed them away, and Clawdia hid her face in my hair.

"No time for that, I'm afraid. You've got a long list of things to do," Arabella announced and made herself comfortable on the sofa. "Have you found the hunters? Do we know if Fafnir is still with them? Or if they are looking for us? Fafnir handed us over to them on a silver platter and gave them the tools to hurt even more of us when we're fighting battles on all fronts. We need eyes on them."

“I’m working on the eyes, but I’m taking care of us first. Look at the guys they’ve got tracking us. Fucking amateurs.”

I was in their directory and filtering based on the project. Our project was called “Dragon.” The hunters they had assigned to us looked no different from Jeff across the street. It was only when I clicked into their profile that I saw their previous missions, kills, and training. Some were like Homer Simpson with a gun, but others were deadly assassins.

Maybe they aren’t amateurs after all.

I hadn’t noticed that Isaac and Omaira stood behind me and were staring at the screen with me. “You’ve found their directory.”

“I can’t take all the credit, but yes. That and all the information they’ve been gathering on us, too. Complete bullshit, of course.”

“It’s on their server? If you delete it, they would lose it too without a backup?”

“I’m in their server. I found a backdoor.”

He rubbed his hands together. “Excellent. Can you send all the information to me? This could be essential to future task team missions.”

“Sure. I wouldn’t delete without taking a copy myself. We’ll need to cloak it, though. We can’t have them finding copies.”

“Let me work on that while you … do whatever it is you’re doing.” He pulled out his laptop and sat next to Arabella.

“Where’s your shadow demon?” I asked Arabella.

“Asleep,” she said and glared at me, so I asked nothing else.

I eyed the other task team leader, one I’d had the least interaction with, as her eyes devoured the information on the screen like she was looking for something. “What brings you here, Omaira? I rarely see you around.”

She crossed her arms. “I’m usually with the teams on the ground. My combat skills and unique gifts make me more useful with them, but I have a keen interest in the hunters, so I want to know what you find.”

“We’ve all got an interest in the hunters.” I looked back at my screen and began sending the hunters looking for us fake notifications on our whereabouts. “Follow that red herring, dickhead. Goose chases for everyone. Should keep them busy.”

Arabella asked, “Do you realize you’re using magic when you do that?”

“What?” I looked at her over my screen.

“It’s coming off you in waves. You aren’t doing it on purpose?”

“No. I’m just doing what I always do.” I rearranged Clawdia, who was falling asleep in my arms, to relieve my dead leg.

She gaped at me. “Your magic is aiding you technologically. Automatically. Without training. There’s definitely something interesting to explore here.”

“Well, whatever magic tech store you create based on my genius, I’ll expect royalties.” *A shame because I’d love to be the one making magic tech gadgets, but my future isn’t here.* Then an idea hit me. “I want to track the origin of the hacker. He might have been defending the compound, but he wasn’t in it. I want to know where he is.”

“Is that relevant?”

“You want eyes? You want to know what they are up to, who they are targeting, and if Fafnir is with them? This guy is the one doing all the watching and protecting and data harvesting for them. If I can pop a few little viruses on his computer, they could tell me everything he is doing. Or we try doing a location spell like we did last time again, but using the code location of this folder as the source.”

“Let’s do it.”

I retrieved the code, pasted it into a Word document, and printed it. “You do it.” I nodded to my sleeping familiar. “Everyone knows you don’t move when there’s a sleeping cat on you.”

She rolled her eyes and retrieved the printout. Arabella didn’t waste time. She performed the spell, the pendent moving wildly until it landed heavily on the map. Still in Sweden, but far from the compound. Just like we did last time, I used the coordinates she gave me to find it on Google maps.

The graphics were terrible, and the entire area was a pixelated mess. Someone had obviously protected this place better than the compound. “What needs more protection than the compound?”

Arabella hummed thoughtfully. “Somewhere where they are vulnerable? A hospital? Or somewhere that needs the extra security. A place of government.”

“Or an academy…” Omaira muttered.

I looked at her questioningly. “You know about a hunter academy?”

“We’ve been aware of it but never found the location.”

I shook my head decisively. “A child couldn’t hack the way I saw that hacker do.”

“A teacher could.”

“A teacher has enough on their plate. They aren’t doing a full-time job and monitoring cameras and communications and battling cyber-attacks away from the compound. It’s not possible. It must be some kind of control base. Let me keep digging.”

An hour later, I was getting frustrated as my search began coming up fruitless while Isaac and Omaira whispered excitedly about the hunter information I’d sent them. They were looking at the project names attached and trying to discover what they were related to, but they were annoying me.

Clawdia woke up as I was contemplating my issue. “What did I miss?” she asked with a yawn.

“I’m about to do something stupid.”

Her violet eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t find a way into this place, but I could contact the hacker. Not directly, but I could send him something, a test, and see if he wants to talk.”

“And you think that’s stupid?”

“He might not want to talk. He might track the message and send people after us. He might realize I’ve got his directory.”

“Charlie, you always find what you look for. Trust your gut. If you think this is going to get you the information you want, then do it. I’m on your side.”

“You can’t peek into the future and tell me what will work?” I asked with a wry smile.

She shook her head slowly. “You know I can’t see our future unless we are in danger. We aren’t in danger yet.” But we both knew a decision from anyone could change that. She whispered, “If you talk to the hacker, could you ask about the other hunters, Jack and Michael? They weren’t sure what they were going to do next, but I want to know they aren’t being hunted down. I owe them. I promised I could find Alani for them.”

Like an owl, Omaira’s head turned. “Who?”

“A girl who disappeared with her family.”

“A hunter asked for Alani?”

“The one who helped me. The one with a drop of supernatural in him that Fafnir was going to sacrifice.”

“You know her?” I asked.

Omaira hesitated before saying, “No.”

Clawdia and I exchanged a glance, and I drawled, “Alrighty, then,” before pretending as if that wasn’t weird.

Clawdia kissed my cheek before announcing she was going to make lunch, which helped clear the room.

Then I got to work comprising a coded message, all beautifully gift wrapped with different puzzles for him to solve. Like peeling an onion if each layer gave you a different problem to solve and unlock before it slid away to reveal my message.

I sent it and waited.

It didn’t take the hacker long to respond. *Impressive.*

His reply was gift wrapped as tightly as mine, and once I completely unraveled it, it read, “You’ve sent the hunters at the compound into a meltdown. Why would I want to speak to you?”

I’ve got him. At least, I thought it was a him. I couldn’t tell. But I assumed, and maybe that was sexist of me, but if I had this much of a crush on a girl, then Clawdia would tear my balls from my body and wear them like earrings. So, for my safety, the hacker was a guy. *I just need to decide how best to go about this.*

Trust your gut.

“Because you’re just as impressed by my hacking as I am with yours. You want to know more about me, and I have some questions to ask. Nothing that will endanger your people, but something that will help mine.”

“I don’t care about your people. I’m a hunter. I don’t want to help you.”

“You saw one of your own almost sacrificed for a drop of supernatural blood. I don’t think it sat well with you either, or you’d have given our new location away already.”

“How do you know I have it?”

“Because I have yours.”

“What do you want?”

“I want to know if the two hunters who left with us, the one with supernatural blood and his friend, are being hunted. And I want to know if Fafnir or Mr. Darren Jensen is still associating with the hunters.”

“The man is long gone with his witches and his dragon. It was completely unheard of that they could be within miles of the compound anyway. I can’t see any of us working with him again.”

“Fafnir is very persuasive. What about the sacrifice and his friend?”

“I can’t be sure. I helped them with new IDs, but I don’t know where they are now. Why do you want them?”

“We owed them something. If they contact you, can you pass along my number?”

Risky, risky. My arse clenched, but I didn’t think he would hurt me. We had a kind of mutual respect for each other. A brotherhood among hackers. Thou shall not sell out a fellow digital wizard.

“This is your number? You’re giving a hunter your number? Aren’t you afraid I’ll find you and kill you?”

“You’re welcome to find me, but killing me will not be as easy. There’s a queue. Plus, I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m trying to clean up a mess that’s damaging humans and supernaturals, so killing me would only mean the hunters are the only ones left to defend the world, and they are drastically underprepared for that.”

“You don’t know what we are prepared for.”

“Sure, kid. Get back to class.” I was fishing, and it was a long shot, but his messages gave off the impression of youth, and since I was trusting my gut…

I was holding my breath when I opened the next response. “You know I’m at school?”

Fuck. Omaira was right when she thought it was an academy. *Do I tell them?*

CHAPTER 13

CLAWDIA

"You are having visions, I hear." I was buttering bread when Omaira spoke softly at my side.

I startled slightly but grimaced and nodded. "That's right."

"Because you are inheriting the power from another?" She picked up the packets of cheese, pulled out the block, and started slicing.

"Yes."

I wasn't sure where she was going with this, but I was interested in finding out. I was also grateful for the help with making lunch. There were lots of bodies in the house, and supernatural ones seemed to be hungrier than most.

"I know something about that. The others expect you to suddenly understand and use your power to protect us, but many of them have grown up knowing their power. It has always been part of their life, and using it has felt natural. When it comes upon you suddenly, it is not so simple."

"No, it's not simple."

"It also comes with a lot of guilt."

I looked at her surprised, and then feelings escaped my mouth in a flood. "Yes. I almost feel like I'm helping murder her by taking her power. But I'd give it back if I knew how. I don't want this responsibility. It's horrible feeling so out of control, so powerless, and yet having the power to affect so many by doing the smallest thing."

"I understand," she replied quietly as she started laying cheese on bread. "I also inherited my power from another. My mother. I was unaware of her identity. She'd hidden for so long and didn't expect to die so suddenly.

Hunters murdered her, and as soon as she took her last breath, I felt all this power rush through me. I didn't know what it was until later."

I placed my knife down and gently touched her arm. When she looked at me with her dark almond eyes, I could see the tears shimmering in them, the trauma still present like an echo of the past. "That's awful. You must have been so scared. How old were you?"

"I was sixteen." She shook herself and returned to making sandwiches with a wry smile. "Older than my sisters when they gained their power, but my story is the most … dramatic."

"You have sisters?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No biological ones. The women I call my sisters are like me. We share ancestors, and our power passes to us upon the death of a relative. There are fifty of us around the world, but five whom I claim as family." She chuckled when she looked up to see my puzzled expression. "I can see the questions written across your face."

"I don't want to ask." But I really, really did. She didn't introduce herself to Charlie and Zaide as a particular supernatural, instead saying that information was classified.

I returned to my lunch-making task and tried to ignore the burning curiosity. Curiosity killed the cat, as the saying goes.

She sighed before straightening. "You and your bonds have done more to progress our mission than we've done in years. It's personal for me, finding the hunters, so you might not appreciate what you've done, but I do. I'll show you what I am."

"Show me—"

Omaira's body rippled, and her image shifted as her whole body changed. One moment, she was herself, a beautiful black-haired Asian goddess, and the next, another person stood in the same spot, wearing the same clothes but couldn't have looked more different in them. This person was blond, buxom, bursting the seams of her blouse, and looked more like a cheerleader than anyone on a supernatural task team.

For a moment, I could only stare.

Then I stuttered, "You … you're a shapeshifter?"

"Shapeshifter, skinwalker, moon touched. All the above. But I only have twelve faces."

"Are you descended from Mestaclocan? I thought they only shifted into animals?"

“I have both Mestaclocan and titan ancestry.”

I blinked, trying to absorb the information. “How—”

“The story my sisters were told is about the titan goddess of the moon, Selene. She controlled the threads of sleep, but humans worshiped her as the goddess of the moon, and that gave her a kind of bond with it.”

“Kind of like familiars,” I whispered, already enamored with the story.

“Yes. People often underestimate the power of worship as a creator. It changes the essence of a being.” She shook her head, and the blond curls bounced before she continued, “Myth would tell you Selene fell in love with a shepherd. But in reality, Endymion was a wolf shifter who had been stalking herds of sheep. Even with their long life, a shifter lifespan’s does not equate to the almost immortal span of a titan, so she formed a bond with him so they could share the same lifespan.

But after the birth of their fifty children, she couldn’t bear to see them die either and asked Zeus for a way to make them immortal. He had access to a relic that granted them immortality, and so for a time, the family lived peacefully in the human realm, ruling as gods among humans.

But after the fall, they all deteriorated. Turns out immortality doesn’t truly exist. Everything dies. Everything except power. Their children, who could shift into copies of other beings, one for each face of the moon, passed, and when they did, their power was granted to the eldest of their children. I’m sure you can imagine what that did to some families.”

“Oh God,” I whispered.

She grimaced and shrugged. “And here we are.”

“Even your voice changes.”

She shook her head. “No, I have to do the voice to remind myself what face I’m wearing. Helps me get into character.”

The door swung open, and Charlie entered. Then stopped as he noticed the stranger in his kitchen. “Who the fuck is this?”

“Charlie.” I put my hands up to ward him off or calm him down. “It’s Omaira.”

Her body shimmered back to her original form. At least, I thought it was her original form. If she had twelve faces to pick from, maybe her original one was hidden, too. Food for thought.

Taking one of the now prepared sandwiches, I took a bite to hide my smile as Charlie’s jaw dropped open.

“Holy fuck.”

Omaira smiled at me. “Inheriting power isn’t fun, but I do enjoy shocking people with it.”

Charlie blinked, shook his head, probably deciding to deal with that new bit of information later, and then announced, “Fafnir’s no longer with the hunters. The hunters looking for us are distracted, and the two hunters we owe are safe as far as we know. Also, you were right. It’s an academy, and my hacker buddy is a student.”

Omaira gasped. “You’ve discovered their academy.”

“I can see the glint in your eyes, but the hunters are a project for after Fafnir’s dead.” He pointed at her in warning before taking a bite out of my sandwich and leaving a crummy kiss on my cheek. I side-eyed him as he munched.

“I can’t help with Fafnir, but I can look into the academy,” Omaira mumbled.

Isaac poked his head into the room, his gaze scanning us. “Ahh, you told them.” He laughed as Charlie and I frowned. “I can tell from the shell-shocked look on their faces. Doesn’t it feel good to let more people in?” he asked Omaira as he began collecting the plates of sandwiches to take them into the living room. “She’s still a work in progress. Our little misfit is a badass, but she’s still warming up to people.”

“Misfit?” Charlie asked as we followed him.

It was Omaira who answered. “There are lots of people in this realm who are a mix of magic, interlinked dimension power, or otherworlder bloods that have diluted.”

“Whose council do they fall under?” he asked.

“Faei. Joseph is my council leader, and I lead my small classified task force.”

He pulled me back onto his lap on the loveseat as he asked, “Why do you have no faei in your team?”

“Although Joseph is very involved in the council, his people are the most isolated from the supernatural community. There are many low-born faei here. However, they are unruly and uninterested in the discipline needed for this kind of role, and high faei think they are too good for hard work.

“I don’t know the difference between high faei and low faei. Do you?” he whispered, and I shook my head.

Omaira explained, “Low faei are beings like trolls, goblins, pixies, redcaps, brownies, selkies, mermaids, and sirens. There are many kinds. High faei are more human in appearance, but with pointed ears and wings. Like your friend.”

It felt like something Daithi should have told us, but I supposed there wasn’t often time for us to sit down and talk about the realms and the magical beings that occupied them.

Charlie sighed and leaned back as I handed him another sandwich. His own this time. “I’m feeling well educated on the realms today. Calls for lunch before we get to spells and dark magic.”

* * *

AFTER LUNCH, Charlie waltzed off to Winnie’s house to look at dark magic, but I stayed and waited for Zaide and Baelen to come back. I also didn’t want to see Charlie and Lydia in the same room together. My mind conjured images of them laughing over potions and hands brushing as they handed each other ingredients.

When Zaide returned, sweaty and breathing hard, it was a welcome distraction. A very welcome distraction. He kissed my forehead, intending to head to the shower, but I stood from the sofa.

“Little Cat?” he asked as I grasped his finger and pulled him up the stairs.

“Don’t question it, my love.”

He chuckled softly as we entered the bathroom. “We won’t fit in that bath, Little Cat. Sit here and wait for a moment.”

He placed me on the toilet facing the shower, and I eyed the cubical. “We could fit in the shower.”

“No, we can’t,” he chuckled as he undressed, and my gaze roamed everywhere my hands wanted to touch. When he started the water, I bit my lip at the sight of his backside.

“I suppose I’ll just have to watch, then.” His arms flexed as he rolled his long braid into a bundle on his head.

He chuckled again. “Don’t pout, Little Cat. You can do whatever you wish with me once I’ve washed the sweat off.”

“I like the sweat.” I crossed my arms.

As steam filled the room, my head felt heavy, and I frowned when Zaide's golden body blurred. My body tilted, and I felt a flash of pain before darkness claimed me.

* * *

IT WAS DARK, but the sound of a pained whimper set my hair on end, and I shivered. I was standing, so I turned to the sound, disoriented and confused since I was just in the bathroom with Zaide. But even in the dark, I could tell I wasn't in the bathroom anymore. I wasn't in Charlie's house. I was having a vision.

Past, present, or future. Look for the threads… What am I looking at?

But before I could attempt to find the threads, a bright light flashed into existence above me, and I flinched, pressing my eyes closed. When I blinked them open and my eyes adjusted, I saw the bald bulb hanging low in the room and a room covered in dark brown splotches. Blood coated the walls and cement floor. And in the middle, a woman quivered.

My heartbeat took off like a bird's wings as I crouched near her. She was beaten and so bloody I couldn't see a patch of unbroken skin. Flayed didn't seem to cover the extent of her injuries.

With the light on, she seemed even more distressed, whimpering and flinching as though expecting the person who had hurt her. Bile rose in my mouth, and I shook with my anger and fear.

Who did this to her? Why? Why am I being shown this? Who is she?

I looked around the room for more clues but couldn't even find the door. The room was empty of everything except a bowl full of waste. I was grateful my vision dulled my senses. The smell must have been nauseating.

Turning back to the woman, I tried to use my powers to see her threads. To heal her. But I couldn't touch her, I couldn't see her threads, and I couldn't heal her, which only made me more afraid for her.

I was cold and clammy when the wall moved and revealed Fafnir.

Of course. But why her? Who is she? Is this the past? Is she a previous wife?

I'd only met Lucia, the wife before me, and I didn't think to find out what his other wives looked like. *If she's a wife, then I already know how*

this is going to go, but why would I need to see it? What is it trying to reveal?

"Have you had some time to think about the questions I asked?" Fafnir asked casually as he walked into the room.

I scrambled away from him as he picked the woman up by her matted hair and glared into her face. I couldn't see if she was looking at him, but she cried out and clawed at his hands. He shook her roughly, and I bit my lip.

I hate this. I hate this. I don't want to see this.

But I kept my eyes open. I had to learn something here, even if seeing this man attacking this woman reopened the scars on my soul.

"She is having visions." It was whispered through cracked lips and a broken jaw, but I heard it clearly.

Who?

Fafnir dropped her to the floor, sneering, and kicked at the woman. "Your disloyalty to your people is sickening."

"She is … not a witch."

"Ah, and I suppose that means something to you. Witches against the world. That's how it has always been. Other supernaturals are not to be interacted with. Is that right?"

I didn't understand what was happening, but it was clear he'd completely lost all his composure. He was mad. Crazed.

Perhaps this isn't a wife. Perhaps this is a witch from more recent times. Perhaps she is someone who has had the misfortune to meet him after losing his dragon.

He squeezed her face in his hands and continued to stare at her with a clenched jaw and heaving breath.

"No. Please." She flailed in his grip, and my whole body shook with the need to do something. To stop him. To hide. But I remained frozen and watching.

His smile was slow and cruel. "You beg, but you will not survive this. Your actions will only decide whether you die fast or whether your suffering is drawn out. You've already once chosen a slow suffering, but I thought you'd learned your lesson. I see that is not the case."

The witch wailed, and she gripped his shirt as though he was her savior. "Please. I'll tell you."

"Tell me, then. Enough with the crying."

“Will not work. If they die, she dies. You won’t … hurt her with their deaths.”

“If they die, she dies. And the other way around?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

“She knows your actions … because she is having visions of the future. You cannot know when she is watching.”

Me. She’s telling him about me. She’s given him our only advantage, and I still didn’t know who she was. A task team witch?

I leaned around to try to recognize the features of her face, but it was so swollen I couldn’t tell if she was human.

She’s been tortured. You can’t blame her for trying to survive or end the suffering.

Fafnir’s body turned stiff mid motion, and he turned his head toward the witch like a puppet. “What did you say?”

“Visions. Powerful. She knows … your plans.”

He let out a roar with his fists clenched so tight and punched the wall, launching his hand into the plaster and sending mess everywhere. I tried not to flinch.

The witch dragged herself away and curled up into a tight protective ball against the wall. Her whimpers were the only sound for a moment until the plaster cracked again, throwing more dust into the air, when Fafnir pulled back his now bloody hand.

His eyes scanned the room with a kind of mania that sent shivers down my spine. “Are you here now, Margaret? Are you watching me even now?”

Hearing my old name was like being doused in freezing water. Suddenly, I was her again, just an innocent girl unable to understand why someone wanted to hurt her so much, and I clenched my hands so tightly that I pierced my skin with my nails, the pain offering only a small distraction.

“Where are you? If you want to watch me, Margaret, why don’t you come in person? I promise not to hurt you … at first. We have a lot to catch up on, after all. You probably have a lot of questions.”

He roamed around the room, searching, his footsteps so loud and heavy. It echoed in my ears like the bang of a drum. I pinched my eyes closed when he approached the wall where I was standing, invisible. He couldn’t hurt me. Logically, I knew that.

Yet I couldn’t help holding my breath when he hesitated in front of me. Blood dripped from his knuckles onto the floor only millimeters from my leg, and when I looked up at him, my heart stopped, because for a moment, I could have sworn he met my eyes.

I let out a sigh and gripped my chest to slow my heart and breathing when his eyes narrowed in another direction and he continued his slow predatory roam around the room.

“Don’t you think you should be punished for killing my dragon? Do you know how hard I worked to free that beast from my body? How much I had to sacrifice?”

“But you don’t care, do you? You’re just like all the others trying to stop me. And once I kill you, I’ll find another way to fulfill my goals because there’s one thing I have that you don’t. Resilience. No matter what life hands me, I take it. But you, you were nothing more than a coward who killed herself the first moment she feared for her life. Even my other wives had more bravery, submitting to their fate, to me. And now you hide from me.”

“I’m not hiding.” My voice warbled, but since he wasn’t able to hear that, I continued to stand tall, locking my knees so they didn’t shake. “I’m right here, but you can’t see me because I’m more powerful than you.”

He leaned down to the witch again and pulled her up by her hair, his lips close to her hair when he said, “You’re going to tell me everything you know about Clawdia and her mates, everything about your leaders, and then I’m going to kill you. It’s up to you how fast I do that.”

Despite my attempt at bravery, his threat to the witch made my eyes blur with tears. I wanted to help her, but I knew, at that moment, there was nothing I could do.

Calm down. He can’t hurt you here. Look for the threads. You need to know if this is past, present, or future.

I concentrated, blocking out the scene in front of me as much as I could while shaking with fear, and searched for the threads of the vision itself.

There’s still a chance to save her if it’s the future. But if it’s the past…

Like a television with a blurry picture, the threads appeared, and they were gold. *It’s the future. We can save her…* Then they flickered to silver, then back to gold. *What does that mean? It can’t be the future and the present at the same time…*

Can it?

Breathing hard, I jolted as I came to, my body cold and my mind stuttering from the shock and fear.

I'm safe. He's gone. It was a vision, and he wasn't really in front of me.

But he took that witch for information on me and my mates.

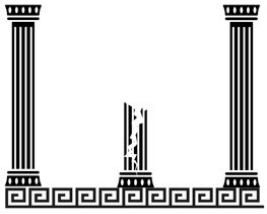
"Zaide," I croaked.

"Little Cat, what happened? Was it a vision?" He was still wet from the shower and cradling me whilst completely naked. A moment ago, I would have appreciated that, but now it felt like everything had changed.

"Fafnir took one of the task team members. She told him about my visions. He's going to kill her."

CHAPTER 14

ZAIDE



As soon as her eyes flickered open and she told me her vision, she immediately fell limp again, and my heart lurched. I quickly carried my Little Cat from the bathroom to Charlie's bedroom, where Baelen and I had been sleeping for the past two nights.

She was exhausted. Her eyes were swollen red with deep shadows underneath them, and her head bled from the cut made by the tile as she fell face-first into the floor.

As I placed her on the bed, I healed her threads back to a healthy green. Despite seeing the wound on her head mend, my brows tightened with worry for her as I stroked back the strands of hair littering her face.

I may have spent years seeing the toll visions took out on Daithi, but watching Clawdia was different. She was my soul pair. She'd fixed the chasm in my soul by reuniting with me and offered me a future beyond anything I could dare to dream of. She loved me beyond all reason.

Seeing her suffering hurts more because I love her so much more.

Our relationship was built on strife and struggle as we navigated challenge after challenge, but this seemed to be making her more beaten and scared. She was even more powerful, but with no knowledge on how to properly use those powers. She handled decisions that went against her healing nature, and now she was even more tortured by being forced to have visions of a man who frightened her to death.

Even my forefathers, the titans of old, would have struggled with her power, and they were not born human or so entangled in this fated web.

She muttered in her sleep and rolled away from me as I tucked her in and prayed her sleep was peaceful. For her sake, I begged my gods that no more visions haunted her, that no one disturbed her by pulling her into a dreamscape, and that her dreams were as tranquil as a still lake.

They might not help, but I hoped they could still hear me. Baelen's fathers were dying, his mother was dying alongside them as their mate, but they were still my gods. And they needed worship to survive.

If we can save the titans, if we can rebuild them and give them faith in their gods again, then perhaps we could save my gods and save Clawdia from this fate.

It was a problem to reflect on another day.

I placed a soft kiss on her forehead, then dressed quickly before hurrying to the house next door. Isaac let me in and followed, grim-faced and silent, as I charged through the living space and kitchen, into Winnie's pink and purple witch room. Everyone looked up and stopped when they saw me. Arabella and Elizabeth were pouring over a book, Charlie and Lydia were glaring at each other over a potion and a sheet of paper, and Alcor lurked in a corner.

Omaira was missing from the room, but I didn't have time to waste.

"Zaide, what—" Charlie started, his annoyance morphing to worry as he took in my face.

"Clawdia had a vision. She couldn't tell if it was the present or the future. Fafnir captured and tortured a task team witch. She informed him of Clawdia's visions, our powers, and our plans."

"Goddess," Arabella gasped and immediately pulled out her phone. "Head count," she demanded when someone answered.

"Is Clawdia all right?" Charlie asked quietly as he approached while Issac went to comfort his lover with a hand to her lower back as she listened intently to her team.

"Shaken. Sleeping now," I replied. He nodded but mirrored my concern.

Arabella looked drawn when she hung up the phone. "Sarah is missing. Only for an hour now. They didn't call because they thought she'd be back any moment now."

Charlie ran his hands through his hair. "Fuck. What are we going to do?"

"Did Clawdia see where she was being held?" Arabella asked, her eyes hopeful.

I shook my head. “Nothing that could help us with identifying it.”

“She could portal there, though, right?” Arabella asked.

“She’s sleeping.” It was a weak excuse, but I didn’t want her facing the reality of her vision when it frightened her so much.

Arabella’s features hardened, and she shook her head fiercely. “I can’t lose another witch in my team. This monster has done enough damage already, killing Rose and now taking Sarah … I won’t leave her to die. I don’t care if Clawdia’s sleeping. Wake her and get her to portal us there.”

Both Charlie and I bristled at her tone, but I replied calmly, “Portaling straight into the room with a male who has nothing to lose and dark magic we can’t counter is foolhardy. He could drain us within seconds.”

Charlie added, “If the vision is of the future, we don’t know how far away it happens. We could portal into an empty room.”

She clenched her hands into fists, but didn’t reply. She knew I was right. We didn’t know what kind of danger Fafnir was and even though he was without a dragon, we couldn’t afford to underestimate him.

A male who has lied, manipulated, died, and been reborn did not just fail at the first hurdle. He had more to his plan than we knew. Of that I was certain.

“We have to do something,” Arabella whispered. “She is missing. The present is becoming the future right now. Your priority might not be saving Sarah, but surely you don’t want her to inform Fafnir about Clawdia’s powers.”

I glared, but before I could reply, Elizabeth interjected, “It’s in all of our best interests to stop Sarah from saying anything. Perhaps we can find a spell to prevent her from talking. That might give us more time to plan a way to save her.”

“Or it will just enrage Fafnir enough to kill her faster.”

Elizabeth sighed deeply. “I understand your desire to rescue the witch, Arabella. No one wants to see their friend and team member die to this beast, but not all of us will survive this battle. Some have already perished to our cause, and we cannot risk doing something so hasty as charging in to save one person.”

“Maybe we can,” Charlie muttered, his brows drawn together in thought as he rubbed his lips.

“Pardon?” To hear him side with Arabella shocked me, especially when it put Clawdia and us in danger.

Charlie gave me an apologetic shrug. “If we surprised Fafnir, we could save her. We can kill him using titan threads just as quickly as he could drain us, only we would have the advantage of a surprise.

“We don’t know how far in the future Clawdia’s vision was, but keeping the visions a secret gives us extra leverage, so I think we should try to save the witch. If she hasn’t already told him anything, then he won’t be expecting a surprise. We can rush in, overwhelm him, hopefully kill him, save the witch, and pat ourselves on the back for a job well done.”

Elizabeth frowned. “But if he knows of your powers, he may already have found a way to ward against them. The building he’s keeping Sarah in might be warded against portals.”

He shrugged again. “Then there’s no harm in trying.”

“You are being entirely too optimistic.”

“Are you sure?” I muttered.

Having been through so much with Charlie, becoming a family together, I trusted him to do what was right for us all. His instincts for finding things were almost as powerful as fate.

However, we charged in without a plan to save Savida, and Clawdia ended up dead. The only difference would be that her death would end all of us.

Watching my new family die along with me would only be comforted by the thought that I wouldn’t have to live a day without them.

Charlie squared his shoulders. “We’ve got to take chances. He’s still here, living and killing, because we’ve been too hesitant. I’m doing this thing where I trust my gut, and I think throwing caution to the wind is our best move right now. Plus, if we have Clawdia with us, she can warn us if we are in danger. She might have a vision about it right now.”

His resolve was admirable, but his faith in Clawdia’s visions concerned me. Clawdia was still learning how to correctly read her visions, how to bring them forth, how to stop them from happening, and how to see the possibilities. It would take time for her to really use them as the powers intended. She was not ready for the responsibility of ensuring everyone survived a hurried plan.

“I’m not sure this is wise,” Elizabeth muttered.

“Then don’t come.” Charlie looked at me and instructed, “Wake her up and tell her to open a portal straight there. We’ll be there in a second.”

I raced back to Charlie’s home, loath to wake her since I knew how much she needed her sleep, but gently shook her awake.

“Little Cat, you must wake up,” I whispered.

“What is it? What happened?” She gasped and sat up. “My vision. Did it happen? Is she—”

“We are planning to rescue the witch. Can you make a portal to the room?”

She blinked and licked her lips. “I can try.”

Against Charlie’s wishes, I stuttered, “I … I do not think it's best if you come with us. You need only open the portal and then leave the rest to us and go back to bed.”

“What?” Her eyes widened, and then I could feel her reaching for our bond, searching for my emotions so she could understand. I let her feel it, my fear, my worry, my desire to protect her.

“Little Cat, you are exhausted. You’ve just had a vision and are under a lot of stress…”

“I’ll only worry if I don’t come with you. I won’t rest.” She shook her head and climbed out of bed. “Besides, what if I see something? How would I warn you—”

I stood with her, then tapped her head gently. *“We have all the tools we need to succeed, Clawdia. I just want to see you safe.”*

Her eyes softened. *“And I want to see you safe. I’m tired of being separated from my bonds, tired of being under threat. I will not sit here and wait for you. I’m coming.”*

I sighed and cupped her face. As she could feel me, I could feel her, and she, like Charlie, was determined to end this battle … soon. I gave in to her all too easily.

“*All right, Little Cat. If that’s what you wish.”*

She pressed her soft lips to mine in a tender kiss I hadn’t known I needed. For a moment, there was nothing but peace.

And then the door slammed, and I heard Charlie charging up the stairs.

Clawdia pulled away with a gentle smile as the door opened and Charlie, Arabella, Alcor, and Isaac poured into the room.

“What’s all the commotion?” Savida asked, peeking blearily from his door, his flame-red hair rumbled.

“We’re going to rescue a witch and kill Fafnir,” Charlie announced as Clawdia created the portal against the bedroom windows.

“A busy afternoon, then. Stay safe,” Savida called as we rushed into the darkness beyond the blue swirl of the portal and immediately halted.

A low moan sounded from somewhere. The dim purple light given off from my scars revealed the witch curled in the corner. The air was stale, thick with the scent of dust, sweat, and blood.

It turned my stomach as flashes of my slavery and my most recent capture jolted my mind like a shock rod. Charlie brushed his hands along the wall, and suddenly, a bulb hanging low in the middle of the room lit up.

Arabella gasped and pushed past us to collapse at the witch’s side, her hands hovering over the broken and battered skin of her team member.

“Sarah, oh my Goddess, are you all right?” Arabella whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah sobbed. “I told... him everything.”

My spirits sank. *We are too late.* Then frustration boiled my blood. *Why did Arabella feel it necessary to share our powers with her team? This could have been avoided if she had simply stayed silent on the matter.*

But it wasn’t the time to argue with her.

Arabella assured her witch. “We’ll deal with that later. I’m just glad you are alive.”

Clawdia kneeled by the witch, and suddenly all the torn skin repaired itself. Her broken bones realigned and fixed while the bleeding stopped. In moments, she turned from an unrecognizable ball of meat to a tired and scared human. It never stopped amazing me how much power we had and how we could use it for the good of others.

“Do you know where he is now?” Clawdia asked.

“He said ... he’d be back … to finish me … later,” Sarah quivered with fear, and I could feel the sympathy pouring from Clawdia as she stroked her arm.

“We’ve got you know. You’re safe,” she whispered.

“Let’s get her back now,” Arabella said, firmly gripping her teammate’s arm to throw over her shoulder and pull her to her feet.

The witch shook her bloodied hair. “The room is spell proof. You might not be able to portal out.”

Clawdia threw out her hand to make a portal, but no blue light appeared. My hands clenched as the consequences of us being trapped here, of Fafnir finding us here, flooded my mind in vivid disastrous images.

“Fuck,” Charlie cursed and rubbed his head.

The witch whimpered again, and Clawdia tried to assure her. Her gaze locked on Charlie and me. “It’s okay. We won’t let him hurt you. He doesn’t know we’re here, and we can overwhelm him, right?”

Isaac sighed. “I hate to be that person, but if he had the forethought to ward the room to prevent magic, then he might have warded it to tell him about anyone who portals in.”

Which meant he could return at any moment to find us. *We need to leave now.*

“We are six powerful supernatural and otherworld beings. We will not be captured so easily. Not again,” I growled, my fear of capture driving me. My hands ran over the rough stone walls, searching, pressing, feeling for anything that wasn’t solid.

“If we can find where he has hidden the ward, we could break it and portal…” Arabella said, and I was vaguely aware as she, Isaac, and Alcor began their own hunt around the room.

“What are you doing?” Charlie asked in a low voice.

“Looking for a door.”

He turned and examined the walls before pointing. “Over there.”

Trusting him and his ability to find whatever he looks for, I moved and pressed my palm flat against the wall, feeling the coolness of the stone and the shift in the airflow through the edges that didn’t quite align with the others. A hidden door.

“It’s here,” I said quietly.

“We can’t use magic…” Arabella began.

“Zaide, can you try punching it?” Charlie interrupted.

“Kicking would be more effective,” I replied as I tapped the stone.

“I’ll take your word for it.” He smiled, then waved at Alcor. “Alcor, you’re a big demon beast. Come, use your muscles.”

A growl rumbled in my chest as I stepped back and rolled my shoulders, feeling the tension coil in my muscles. I kicked, driving my heel into the part of the door where I assumed the lock would be. A deep, echoing crack reverberated through the walls, dust trickling from the seams.

As I retracted my foot, Alcor kicked just as I did and caused the same cracking. We traded and kicked again harder until pain lanced up my leg and the dust made our eyes water. Each failed attempt made us more desperate. The noise and the shaking couldn’t go unnoticed for long.

I wasn’t sure how long or how many kicks it took, but when we were both sweating and tiring, something gave.

A deep, splintering groan shuddered through the wall as the stone shifted, loosened, then broke. The door caved outward, opening to a dark passageway.

For a moment, we did nothing but catch our breath and wait.

Then Charlie let out a sigh of relief. “Remind me not to piss you two off.”

“How did you know that would work?” Arabella asked Charlie as she curled her arm around her still-shaking witch.

He shrugged. “Everyone with special powers forgets the basic rules. Magic isn’t always needed, and giant supernaturals can always break things.”

“Dibs not going first,” Isaac said quickly.

Charlie coughed but clearly said, “Coward.”

“I’ll go,” Clawdia said, and before I could stop her, she shifted to her familiar form and raced out of the room, leaving a pile of clothes in her wake.

“Clawdia,” I hissed, and Charlie and I immediately set off after her.

The dust tickled my throat, but I refused to cough. We walked as quickly and quietly as possible, Clawdia’s white fur leading us like a beacon up wooden stairs to a door. She looked up as we approached, and I picked her up, growling, “Don’t run off without us, Little Cat.”

Charlie opened the door and peered out. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s here. Put her down, and she can tell the others to come out.”

I placed her back on the ground, and she raced back down the stairs as we walked into … a kitchen?

“This place is nice. Definitely doesn’t suggest there’s a dungeon in the basement,” Charlie muttered as he strolled around the room.

“What are you doing, Charlie?” I whispered, looking around wide-eyed and listening for others. “Let us create a portal and leave.”

“I want to have a look around,” Charlie said. “Maybe there’s something outside of this room that can tell us more about where Fafnir’s hiding, what he’s planning, where my family are. Dralie and I have a bone to pick with him.”

I frowned. We all wanted Fafnir dead, but what did Dralie have against him? Was it just that the green dragon chased him?

Clawdia, human and dressed, came back through the door, and her eyes widened. “This is the house where your defected family are staying. This is where I saw the vision of him raising Mary’s ghost and announcing revenge.”

“Really…” Charlie drawled as he headed into the living area, Clawdia following him. “Where are the others?”

“I sent them back through a portal. Sarah was shaking so much she wouldn’t make it up the stairs,” I heard her say as I hovered in the kitchen, looking through a book on the counter. It seemed like a magic book. “There’s the knife Mary made for him. Don’t look at it. It’s hypnotic.”

My blood seemed to freeze in my body when I heard another voice shout, “Stop where you are, thieves!”

“Thieves? We haven’t taken anything,” Clawdia said, outrage clear in her voice.

“Not yet,” the voice scoffed.

Still holding the book, I walked slowly, quietly, into the living space to see the back of the witch holding Clawdia and Charlie in a magical cage. Clawdia’s gaze flickered to mine, and I sent her reassurance through our bond.

Charlie’s gaze didn’t move from the witch. He smiled. “Hi, June. Nice to meet you. How are you? Did you know there was a torture chamber downstairs?”

“How do you know who I am?” She glared. “Who are you?”

Taking a calming breath, I decided against hitting the witch in case I damaged her too much. Instead, I concentrated on the overall green threads wrapped around her body and tried to focus on her head.

As I did, more thinner and varied threads appeared. They were all green, healthy, but I imagined the threads turning white, and as I expected, June collapsed, hitting the floor with a thud and freeing Charlie and Clawdia from the cage.

“Is she dead?” Charlie asked, kneeling to feel her pulse.

“No, just asleep.”

Clawdia gaped at me. “How did you do that? You didn’t touch her.”

“While on my run, I reflected on how you described the difference between the kind of visions you are having, and I believe there are ways of being more specific with our own gift too.

“Rather than just pulling up or down on the ladder of health, I considered whether we can look more closely at the threads around specific parts of the body and affect those directly. At the moment, we are just turning the overall thread red or green and hoping for the best, but we can focus down, so I looked for her mind and attempted to turn it off without harm. White seems to be the color of mind threads when they sleep.”

“When did you see that?” Clawdia asked, her eyes wide.

I shrugged. “When I began experimenting on my run, I came across a couple napping in the park. The threads around their mind were white. I simply attempted to do the same to this witch.”

“Zaide, that’s genius. I can’t wait to see what else we can do with this!” Clawdia exclaimed, a smile lighting up her face which almost blinded me.

Charlie barked a laugh. “Such a peacekeeping golden giant.”

“You learned that while on a run…” She shook her head and squeezed my hand. “You’re incredible.”

“Yes, yes, he’s brilliant and amazing, and we really should get out of here before Fafnir and the other witches come back.” Charlie picked up the witch’s limp arm and then looked at me. “Give me a hand.”

Without thinking, I helped him pick her up, and she stood, limp and heavy between us, as Clawdia made yet another portal. *My poor Little Cat must be getting tired.*

“Wait. We’re taking her?” Clawdia asked when she looked back at us.

Charlie smiled widely. “Yes. They took one of ours. We’ll take one back. I’m sure Elizabeth will be thrilled to see her cousin again.”

CHAPTER 15

BAELEN

Darshaw nudged me out of my thoughts with a fanged smile. “Let’s see her now.”

I shook my head. I should have known he was going to insist on seeing her and portaled back sooner, but he deserved to know everything. He was the one who raised me when my fathers kicked me out of Tartarus.

“I need to get these…”

He interrupted me with an eye roll. “I’m sure your problems in the human realm are many and difficult, so why not ease your mind with resolving your family differences before you fight your battles there?”

“I don’t have time.” I looked at the artifacts in my hands. Elizabeth would expect me back with them soon so the witches could begin their defense against the otherworlder invaders.

“There should always be time for family. I think all of you have forgotten that. It’s time to fix it, especially since we don’t know how long they have left.”

Perhaps talking with her might cool some of my anger and take away the betrayal that tainted my bond with Clawdia.

“All right. Let’s see her first. Clawdia told me where she is.”

The blue swirl of the portal revealed rubble, but I stepped through, curious about where she’d been hiding.

We were still in Akar—the dim day and the familiar landscape told me that—but this place was on a distant island south of the mainland where Mother had grown up. It was her escape and one that both Darshaw and me hadn’t returned to because it had been destroyed when she went missing.

He cursed. “Right under our nose.”

I reached out and touched … something but instantly recognized the power of a relic. The image of the destroyed cottage shimmered out of sight, and a small cottage revealed itself, lit by dim lights and covered in the night flora that glowed.

I gritted my teeth. “Hidden by an artifact from my fathers’ treasury.”

He shook his head, equally furious. “Of course.”

We strode into the cottage without knocking, both of us angry and glaring, but when the woman inside turned around, we both stopped in our tracks. Her red eyes pierced mine and their familiarity brought so much of my repressed emotions to the surface that I almost choked.

Memories of her hugs flashed in my mind, the smell of her hair oil enveloping me as her arms held me tight and washed away my fears after a night terror.

I remembered her soft voice and how she’d stroke my face as I slept, singing softly about the darkness meeting the light. She was proud and smiled widely as she taught me to fight with the many weapons she’d mastered, telling me tales of each and how she’d used them to best her enemies.

I’d missed her but didn’t realize how much until now. The emotions had been too clouded by anger that had washed away the longing, the child inside me that just wanted to see his mother, to talk to her.

I’d ignored that inner child for as long as I could, but doing so had only caused me pain. It was time to push away the anger and let him speak, but I was shaking with rage and relief. I couldn’t form words.

Speaking my truth was not my strong suit.

Darshaw forgot his anger and let out a sigh so deep that he nearly melted into a puddle on the floor. Then he was pulling his sister into his arms and muttering, “Thank Darkness you’re alive.”

“Of course I am, brother.” She chuckled even as he squeezed so tightly I thought she might lose her head. “I wouldn’t leave you truly. I just needed some space.”

“For thirty-five years?” he asked incredulously, pulling away to cup her face.

“You’ve been alive so long that I thought it would feel like a blink to you.”

There was probably some truth to that. My parents and uncle were some of the oldest creatures in the realms, and after being alive for thousands of years, the passing of a few years must be short, all things considered.

But he stared into her eyes, and I wasn't sure if he wanted to pop her head off or strangle her, but his arms shook slightly as he growled, "You know it wasn't. You've felt the distance in those years, sister. I've missed you. Why did you have to hide? And here, of all places?

She smiled and lifted a shoulder. "You know I've always loved this place."

He let her go and sighed as he leaned against the kitchen countertop. "I was sad when I saw it destroyed. I thought it was a sign from the great forces that you were dead and didn't think to come closer to see the ruins."

She nodded slowly. "I know. I'm sorry I caused you pain, but I needed you to focus on Baelen while I focused on my visions."

"You could have told me to watch him. You could have let me raise him properly instead of letting your mates make him feel worthless and unwanted."

She shook her head, her dark hair gliding like a curtain over her shoulder. "Had I told you, you would have tried to stop me. You would have told him where I was, and you would have forced me out of my vision threads, but I needed to be there. I needed to weave them the way I wanted his future. The best version. If I didn't…"

"Only you know that for certain. I'm sorry, but my feelings of betrayal and hurt aren't erased. You have a lot of making up to do, especially considering you are dying with your mates."

She laughed, and her eyes were soft as she looked at him. "We all die eventually, brother. We've lived far longer than others."

"We've lived for duty. It has not been a blessing." He crossed his arms. "If we suffer, we suffer together. You promised me when you mated those monsters that it would not mean I lost you."

"I know. Perhaps in my final days I'll be able to live without the burden of duty and instead have fun. You can join me. Take some time away from the kingdom."

"If I leave for a long time, I'll come back to see someone in my throne. Yet I hope we can enjoy whatever time we have. If you leave me, I won't be far behind. I'm not meant for this world without you, sister."

It frustrated me, this conversation. My mother, who I hadn't seen since I was fifteen, hadn't even acknowledged I was in the room with her, and yet she and my uncle were planning their deaths as though losing them wouldn't kill me. As though I shouldn't concern myself with it. I looked away and clenched my fists to control myself.

Darshaw coughed and finally glanced at me. "Let's not dwell on deaths. I think you have another guest waiting to greet you. He's not as excited as I am, but he is just a child."

When her eyes met mine, I nodded, broke the contact, and said, "Mother," in the calmest, blandest voice I could muster.

"My child," she breathed. She moved to stand right in front of me, but I didn't reach out, and neither did she.

"I haven't been a child for a while."

I held my breath as she reached up to cup my cheek. She hadn't needed to reach the last time she saw me. I was a child then. "You are always a child in your mother's eyes, and it still pains me to see you hurt. Especially since it was I that put it there."

She held the same power to force me to talk as she always had, whether to confess to throwing apples at the palace rooms or tell her of some pain I didn't want her to know about. As I stared into her eyes, my tongue loosened, and all my hurt and questions poured out.

"I've held on to the last words you told me like they were my manifesto. I trusted your vision with me as the savior of the titans, and I trusted you when you told me you needed to leave, but I was *fifteen*, Mother, and I needed you. Why did you have to leave and stay away for so long?"

She sighed, stepped back, and waved for us to follow her as she said, "Let's sit while I explain."

The cushion on her sofa tried to consume me as I sat down opposite her, and I wrestled with it, using the armchair as leverage while Darshaw chuckled behind me. I noted he didn't attempt to sit and side-eyed him as my mother spoke.

"Thirty-five years ago, I saw a vision of a witch in the human realm. She was going to get pregnant and abort the baby. I didn't understand why the great powers would show me such a redundant vision, but when I looked into the threads, looked into the witch's powers, the potential of the child, I eventually saw you, fully grown with this child and two others, soul mates, making a family."

I raised a brow, surprised her hear it was Charlie she saw first. She pulled a pillow into her lap and played with the tassel.

She continued, “I knew it was important. The more I looked, the more I saw a way for me to save the titans, but I needed time to weave the threads, to force this woman onto a path in which she wouldn’t abort her child but instead gave him away.”

Her fingers weaved the strands of the tassel together.

Her voice was low and quiet when she said, “I wasn’t supposed to leave for long, but your fathers refused to believe in the possibility. They were too worn down by disappointments, too wrapped in their own guilt, too proud to trust me. I admit I was angry with them, but I wouldn’t leave you for their actions.”

She looked up at me, staring directly, meeting my gaze so I could see her sincerity bleed from her eyes.

“The last thing I wanted was to leave you. I wanted you to have the parents I dreamed you’d have, to know our unconditional love, but that didn’t turn you into the male you needed to be for this mission. It didn’t give you the opportunity to meet your soul mates.

“I told you I would return when I could, and I know it’s been lonely, that your duty smothered your pain, and I’m furious with your fathers for treating you as they did. They will feel my wrath for hurting you, but I swear to you, it was the best future I saw for us all. Your soul mates make it worthwhile, do they not?”

Would I have preferred the love of my parents and never known the love of my soul mates?

The love I received from my soul mates didn’t erase the hurt inflicted by my parents’ mistreatment and neglect of me. I knew which option offered me less pain.

But knowing Zaide and Clawdia, even Charlie, and the family we were creating made the difference. Had I never known them, I wouldn’t wonder if I were missing out on anything.

Yet being without them now would leave me a broken male dying for the taste of light. They made it worthwhile … and that softened my anger toward my mother.

I understood her decision to save the titans and the realms because I had the same desire, the same duty to the balance of the interlinked dimensions, but I didn’t like how she’d gone about her plan.

“Why couldn’t I tell my fathers about the mission you gave me to save the titans? If they’d known—”

“They would have stopped you. They would have insisted that gods cannot interfere so directly, not even through their son, and they would have trapped you in that palace to become their caretaker. The titans needed you, Baelen.”

I knew she was right.

As calmly as I could, I replied, “Like Darshaw said, your explanations don’t ease the pain your plan has caused me, and I need time to think more about it, but I appreciate that it was a difficult decision for you to make.” The silence was uncomfortable, made worse by our locked gaze. Finally, I said, “Clawdia said you were unwell, but you seem fine.”

“I’ve aged.” She chuckled humorlessly. “But I am getting by. I am no longer having so many visions, and therefore the sickness your fathers have been feeling has crept into me.”

“And yet you’ve remained to suffer alone even though they have each other.” It didn’t seem fair.

She smiled. “I was waiting for you to take me home.”

I shook my head, suddenly angry again, and spilled more of my feelings. “I hate your visions, and now you are passing them onto my soul mate. Now she has to suffer, and I have to relive all the manipulation, the lies, the forced smiles all over again with the woman who owns me body and soul. I can’t escape her.”

She raised a brow and asked softly, “Do you want to? You would leave her to this curse alone?”

I glared at the insinuation. “I don’t want to, and I would never leave her, but the visions will destroy us, just as they destroyed you and my fathers.”

“There is never one cause of a relationship breakdown, Baelen. My visions might have caused my choice to leave your fathers, but they are responsible for their reactions just as you are. They were proud, dismissive, and rude when I approached them, and in my visions, I saw how they hurt you because you are half akari.

“Despite that, they are my soul mates. I’ve spent thousands of years with them. I know their flaws and have missed them during our temporary separation. I know they’ve missed me even as they’ve cursed my name.” She smiled in a way that reminded me of her predatory nature and said, “I look forward to seeing them soon.”

I restrained a shudder, suddenly feeling sorry for my fathers even though I desperately wanted to watch her teach them a lesson.

She continued, “You have the same power of choice your fathers had. You can choose your fear of visions and create the terrible future you imagine. Or you can open your heart and mind to the possibility that your future can be as happy as you want it to be. Because happiness is found in the small things. Joy is the small touches, the kind words, the little gestures.

“Clawdia won’t see those moments in her visions. She will only see what the great powers wish her to see to guide you on your larger path. In the moments when the ground shifts and duty calls, you need to stand together, trust each other, and care about each other. She needs you, so don’t be too hard on her, child. She already has a great weight on her shoulders, and all she wants is your love and support.”

Her words struck a chord with me, and I nodded, my anger melting away like frost. Despite being absent for thirty-five years, a mother’s advice could still reach me, steer me.

She stood, smiling, and patted my shoulder.

“You have always been my priority, Baelen, and I know it felt as though I abandoned you, but I’ve watched you in my visions. I’ve seen your struggles and your triumphs. I’m so proud of you.” My eyes filled at her words, and I blinked them back, embarrassed. “You think I lied when I told you that you were going to be the savior of the titans, but I didn’t. I just knew you couldn’t do it alone. You are never alone, now you have them.”

She laughed as she spun around, looking at the floral decoration of her small cottage. “I will miss this place, but it’s time I left. As much as it’s been my home, I think it’s time I returned to their side.”

Darshaw pulled her in for another hug. “Good luck, sister. You won’t find them welcoming, but I have faith in your ability to win them over.”

“If they are angry, it means they still love me, and I’ve never lost a battle.”

Her fangs descended, and I was reminded that her soul mates tasted as good to her as mine did to me. *For thirty-five years, she survived on other blood?* A newfound respect settled inside me as I acknowledged her sacrifice. I wasn’t sure I could ever do the same.

But I hadn’t met my children yet.

Darshaw nudged my head, and I stood. “Send me home before you visit your fathers. I don’t need to witness what comes next.” He shuddered, and

my mother laughed, playfully hitting him as I created a portal for him back to his castle. “I will be in touch, sister. I will kill them if they hurt you.”

She lifted her shoulder and replied, “We hurt each other, brother. It’s time to forgive it all.”

* * *

I PORTALED us straight into my fathers’ suites and watched her face as she looked around what used to be their shared home. The portraits of her were gone, all of her clothes and accessories removed. I wasn’t sure if they were removed to another part of the palace or if they’d really gotten rid of all her things in a rage.

She didn’t seem upset.

My fathers, however, weren't angry; they were furious. The tick in Charos’s jaw and the pulsating vein in Riseir’s forehead warned me of an impending explosion as we stepped into the room where they were enjoying an afternoon game.

I crossed my arms as I waited for the eruption.

Finally, between gritted teeth, Riseir said, “The prodigal mate returns along with our son. I didn’t realize it would be such a momentous day.” He stood, the scrape of the chair against the marble floors sounding like a threat, before he strode over to us.

Mother didn’t flinch as he picked up her hand and kissed it mockingly. “Welcome back.”

“Of course you didn’t know I’d return today,” she replied mildly. “It’s not you who can see the future.”

Charos snapped. “No, it was you who believed she knew everything, who couldn’t confide in her mates—”

“I’m not here to argue with you.” She held up a hand, completely ignoring her most temperamental mate. “I have returned because we are all dying, and if that is the case, we should greet the great beyond together, should we not?”

“You are dying?” Hedri asked quietly, approaching wide-eyed and slowly as though she might disappear again if he blinked.

“You thought I would escape the death of my soul bonds dying?” she asked with her brows raised and her hands on her hips.

“Your curse keeps you—”

She shook her head. “My curse is passing to another. I’m not seeing as much as I used to. I’m weaker.”

“No,” Hedri whined.

Riseir asked, “Who is taking Fate’s curse?”

They looked at me. I shook my head and replied, “My soul mate.”

“You didn’t bring them to meet us?” Hedri asked, his eyes glazed over as he looked at my bonds. He’d been planning a feast in celebration of me finding my mates when I last spoke to him.

“Not today,” was all I replied. My eyes had shifted to Charos, who approached his mate quietly, anger and pain seeping into his expression.

“Why, Nisha?” he whispered.

Her bottom lip trembled before she sucked it in and squared her shoulders. “It was the only way.”

“I don’t believe that.”

She closed her eyes. “It was the best way to ensure we could right our wrongs, save your people, and create a son who could handle such responsibility with other unique souls who were created for this journey. They’ve already healed the shadow realm portal, and the good it’s done for the interlinked dimensions is … untold.”

“You’ve healed the shadow portal?” Riseir asked.

I shrugged as though it were no big deal and not the most traumatic event of my existence. “I’ve been busy.”

“So it seems…” he drawled.

“You didn’t leave because you were angry with us?” Hedri asked. He’d picked up her hand and held it in both his, petting it like an injured animal.

“I was angry with you. Your disbelief in my vision, your hubris, as well as the way I saw you treat our son made me furious with you.” They opened their mouths to protest, but she held her other hand up. “I don’t want to listen to your excuses right now. I understood how you felt when the life pool was destroyed, but for you to go so far and disown him…”

I raised my brows. They disowned me because of the life pool? Perhaps blamed me for not being able to stop the destruction? I wanted to ask since it was the first time I’d heard this, but Mother shook her head.

“Now isn’t the time to discuss it. We all have work to do, and I won’t allow us to settle into complacency and await our death. We are going to fight for our child’s future.”

Charos smiled, the first I'd seen since she'd left. "There's my female."

Riseir was still hesitant. "You are back for good?"

"I won't leave. I want to resolve our differences. I want my soul mates back… I miss the taste of you."

I nearly gagged as their eyes turned from angry to lustful.

Hedri pressed kisses to her hand and arm. "I knew you'd return to us, love. You were never supposed to be gone so long."

I covered my eyes. "Please, not in front of me. This is sickening."

My mother laughed loudly, and I glared through my fingers at her. "Sorry, Baelen." She untangled herself, not without difficulty, from Hedri and began striding from the suite. "Walk with me for a moment, Baelen. I know you need to get back, but there's something you'll need to add to your collection of artifacts."

I narrowed my eyes at the back of her head as I followed her through the corridors. "I thought you weren't having visions anymore."

"I'm not dead yet."

Riseir called, "Nisha, don't let him raid any more from our treasury."

"What's yours is mine, dear," she called back sweetly. Then, as she opened the door, she added with more edge, "He will have what he needs."

"What do I need?" My stomach turned with anxiety.

"It's nothing terrible, I promise." She smiled and guided me to the weapon wall before pulling off a golden axe and handing it to me. "This axe will break any bond between people. Any bond."

"Why would I need that?"

"You'll see when you return." She rubbed my arm as I searched her eyes for the information she withheld. "Now hurry back. Your family needs you."

CHAPTER 16

CHARLIE

Elizabeth howled with laughter when she saw what and who we'd brought her. It was so scary and unexpected that I froze and exchanged worried glances with Zaide as I placed my birth mother's cousin on a chair in Winnie's witch garage and tied her to it.

As Elizabeth wiped away tears and chuckled, she pointed to the ropes and said, "Someone spell those so she can't use magic and escape."

Arabella did so since I was still a witch noob, and she also gave the council member a wide-eyed freaked-out glance.

"Are you going to share the joke?" I asked and crossed my arms. *I hate not knowing what's going on.*

She smiled, tears still in her eyes. "You don't realize how perfect it is that you dragged June back here."

"Only because you won't tell us."

"I found a phone hidden in a spelled drawer in that house. I was going to get you to look through it, but I figured out the passcode myself, and when I looked at the messages, I realized it was June texting her friend for a place to stay to escape Fafnir. She wanted to take her daughter, Maeve, with her. Her texts said she thinks the situation has gone too far and it might have been a lie."

I raised a brow as I contemplated the sleeping witch. "So, she won't be hard to convince to help us."

"Out of all of them, I think we'll have a better chance with her."

"Explains what you meant about hoping someone was going to switch sides." I held out a hand. "Give me the phone anyway, and I'll look through

it while we wait for Sleeping Beauty to wake up. Maybe I can find something about the friend."

She pulled it out and handed it to me. "While you do that, Arabella and I will look through this book you've found, Zaide. I think it will be enlightening." He nodded, his arms wrapped around Clawdia like a blanket as she fiddled with the ends of his braid, her eyes half lidded.

I couldn't really tell what she was feeling since our bond was still weird, so I wasn't sure what was making her anxious enough to play with Zaide's hair, but I was trying not to freak out about the bond or worry too much about Clawdia because it would only set Dralie off. The last thing I needed was him distracting me.

"I've got a wake-up potion ready," Lydia announced proudly.

I wasn't sure what Elizabeth had told her when they'd gone for a walk, but she was full of "save the realm" spirit now, and it kind of pissed me off. She'd vetoed a lot of my ideas on how to get tech to work with magic and better warn supernaturals earlier too. I didn't know enough about magic, and she didn't know enough about technology, so we were both mostly arguing with no clue either way. I was glad Zaide had interrupted with a new mission, because the one I had with Lydia sucked.

Lydia continued, "Also, with some of Charlie's suggestions, I think I've created something we can get the witches in the safe houses working on."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"I think using a sensor around the feather to know when it turns red and creating an app for supernaturals to be warned when the light changes is clever." She smiled, but I distinctly remember her telling me she thought it was the dumbest thing she'd heard only two hours ago.

I side-eyed Clawdia and noticed her jaw clenched and her eyes narrowed like lasers on Lydia. *Ah. All right. Well, if she wants to wind up Clawdia, it's her funeral.*

"I'll get you the name of an app designer." I made a note on my phone. "But just warning people of portals coming in won't help unless you know who is coming in. Your supernatural task team might need a recruitment drive to get people checking others into the realm. Making sure they aren't going to kidnap anyone. Tracking them."

"One step at a time, Charlie," Elizabeth replied absently as she poured over the pages of the magic book, Arabella peering over her shoulder and muttering.

I replied, frustrated, “Yes, but from a development side of things, it’s easier if you have even a basic plan for those things rather than add them on later.” But no one was listening. I sighed and turned my attention to the phone Elizabeth found. I picked up Isaac’s laptop, which he was letting me borrow; plugged in in the phone; and started looking through it.

“Why can’t you make the app?” Lydia asked. She leaned over the counter and fluttered her eyelashes.

I glared. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I only have so many hands. Someone else can do it.”

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Zaide picking Clawdia up. He mouthed, “bed,” and I nodded, knowing her exhaustion had just hit her.

The messages were between June and her friend, April Tomlinson. I really hoped it was a code name; two month-named people being friends felt wrong. Like if a woman named London and was friends with someone named Paris and they made a Capital City WhatsApp group. As I clicked on the green button, I gagged as I found the Monthly Catch Up group. *Oh God, it’s even a pun.*

The messages were thankfully not punny, but incredibly soppy. April wasn’t just a friend, it seemed. And April wasn’t a witch. She was, by the sounds of it, a wolf shifter who had offered June and Maeve sanctuary within her pack.

Walking into the living room with the laptop and phone, I found Isaac lounging on the sofa with Alcor. “Hey, Isaac, you know a woman called April Tomlinson?”

“No, why?”

“She’s a wolf shifter.”

His eyes narrowed. “I don’t know every wolf shifter in the world. Do you know all the witches?”

“I don’t claim the witches, and I’m the only dragon now,” I replied smugly.

He just raised a brow and asked, “Why are you asking?”

“She’s offering to save June and Maeve from Fafnir by letting them hide with the pack.”

His lips twisted. “She’d need to have permission from the alpha.”

“How can I find out whose pack she belongs to?”

He smiled and waved me over. “We have a directory.” He dragged the laptop over and brought up a website listing names and pack members

before handing it back to me.

Baelen charged into the house, his hands holding an axe and a bowl, and Isaac and I jumped at the sight of him.

“What the hell’s that for?” I asked him, eyeing the axe.

“Mother gave it to me to break bonds.” He raised a brow. “I don’t suppose you have some use for it?”

“You know.” I tapped my chin. “I think I do.”

* * *

ARMED WITH KNOWLEDGE and a magical axe, and once Elizabeth had looked through the magic book, we were ready to talk to our captive. It was kind of full circle for me.

When I first met Elizabeth in the dreamscape, she had me tied to a chair and interrogated me for information, and now we were the ones about to do the same to her cousin. *Must be a family tradition.*

Lydia splashed some of her potion on June’s eyelids, and within seconds, June fluttered awake. Having done her job, Lydia left to work with Arabella and Baelen on the portal warning system for supernaturals.

“Good evening, June. Welcome back,” I cheered.

“Where am I?” She blinked and then glared at me. “Who are you?”

“June,” Elizabeth said softly, gaining the attention of the captive witch.

She gasped. “Elizabeth. You’ve kidnapped me?”

“Kidnapping is a strong word,” I said. “Let’s call it … relocated.”

Elizabeth cut me a sharp glance. “You sound like a movie villain.”

“This isn’t your cottage…” June was saying as her head lolled to look around. Then she realized she was tied and panicked, her eyes widening. Her frantic movements to pull her hands out of the ropes only made her chair wobble."

“Calm down, June. I won’t hurt you. We just want to talk.”

“You want me to tell you about Fafnir and his power, but I can’t,” she spat, wriggling in her ropes. “We are committed to his cause. Not just verbally, but magically. We vowed to support him.”

I wanted to punch the air. *Fuck yes.* I knew this would happen, and for once, we weren’t on the back foot. I had a sparkling golden axe to easily

solve this issue. Baelen might not like visions, but it was definitely helpful having Fate on your side.

Elizabeth continued the interrogation. “How have you vowed? What are the consequences for breaking it? What can you tell us?”

“Why would I tell you anything?” June sneered.

Oh! My turn. My turn!

“Because we found your secret phone. We know about your texts with April and how you don’t want to follow Fafnir anymore. You might not talk about certain things, but it’s clear you can say you don’t want to support him.”

“You read my—how dare you!”

I just needed a mustache to twirl as I paced to really complete the evil villain look.

“But the thing is, April didn’t ask her alpha if you guys could hide with her pack, and now that he’s aware, your invitation is rescinded. So, if you want you and your daughter to get out alive, you need to tell us everything.”

“You’ve—you’ve put her in danger. Her alpha—”

“Has promised April won’t be reprimanded but will be reminded that guests of the pack need to be okayed with him first. Nice guy.”

What I didn’t say was that he wouldn’t ever give sanctuary to witches who’ve orchestrated the rise of the biggest threat against supernaturals outside of humans. Which is fair.

She spluttered, looking from me to her cousin. “Why—why have you done this? Elizabeth, we are family.”

“We are, but I can’t ignore what you and the others have done in order to support Fafnir. Working with hunters. Capturing witches. Destroying the library holding some of our oldest records. I even heard that you influenced Karin and taught her the dark magic she needed to drain the wards of power. You know this is wrong, June. You know it’s gone too far. So, please, answer my questions: What, specifically, was in your vow, and what are the consequences?”

“We vowed to support Fafnir in all his endeavors. If we betray him, we’ll lose our power.”

Only lose power? Even Debs had Winnie’s vow meant her death if she didn’t survive.

Then it hit me. Fafnir was an evil that wouldn’t want a vow to punish betrayal so easily. He’d take their power and then make them regret they

were ever born before killing them.

I raised an eyebrow. “Betraying him doesn’t include leaving him while you hide in a pack? How were you going to do that?”

“I can support him from a distance.”

“If you are telling us about him in order to persuade us to join him, that would support his endeavors…” Elizabeth straightened, lifting her gaze to the ceiling to think.

But I already had a better plan.

“Or you can let me break your vow with Fafnir, and you can tell us everything without the mental gymnastics.” I smiled.

June rolled her eyes, clearly getting far too comfortable as our captive. “You can’t. You might as well kill me.”

“Contrary to popular belief, we don’t go around killing people,” I muttered, crossing my arms. I could feel Elizabeth’s eyes burning a hole in my head, but I ignored her.

June scoffed. “The familiar killed Mary, but I expect you are on her side.”

“What?” Elizabeth asked.

I froze. *Had we forgotten to tell her of her niece’s death?*

Oh, fuck. We didn’t tell her.

But honestly, we’ve had a lot on our plates, and she’ll have to get in line if she wants to make this an issue. Mary was the worst.

Unable to ignore June’s revelation, I turned and muttered to Elizabeth, “You know she wouldn’t have if she didn’t have to. Mary tried to kill her. She’s felt awful ever since.”

Elizabeth swallowed, took a shaky breath, and replied quietly. “We’ll talk about it another time.”

It didn’t stop June from hearing and shouting, “She killed your niece, and you want me to help you? She’s a murderer.”

“Mary killed her witch to make that enchanted blade on your mantelpiece,” I retorted. “Let’s not throw stones from glass houses.”

“Not to mention how many supernaturals have died because you’ve supported Fafnir,” Elizabeth added softly.

The silence was heavy, and June looked at the ground as she fidgeted in her bonds. Elizabeth and I seemed to be on the same page about letting her stew as she considered her choices. I scrolled through my phone while

Elizabeth scribbled in a book like we were monitoring an exam rather than questioning a captive.

Maybe I wasn't as good at being evil as I thought.

"You won't let me go, will you?" June eventually asked.

I let Elizabeth take the lead. June just needed a gentle nudge over to the good side, and we'd get the answers we needed. I could feel it.

"You were trying to get away from him, June. Trying to protect Maeve. We can help you. Why won't you work with us?"

She sighed. "What do you want?"

"Information on how this has happened and what he promised and knowledge on how to work dark magic against him."

She bit the inside of her cheek and shifted her gaze from Elizabeth to me and back. "They are going to think I've betrayed them. Or worse, that I've died."

I picked my nails. "It would be better if he thought you were dead because if he knows you've told us anything, he'll kill you in far worse ways than we could. You know that."

"What if he is able to find me? What if the dark magic connects us?"

"Is that your way of telling me it does?" I raised a brow before shrugging. "I can't say I know much about dark magic, but I know the magical axe I have breaks bonds. The bond you have through your vow or a bond you have through dark magic should be broken. And even if he still finds you, we'll protect you like we're protecting all the other witches you captured from the island. You will be safe."

"This is one of Baelen's artifacts?" Elizabeth asked as she picked up the axe to examine it.

I nodded but warned, "Be careful with it, though. I'm not sure how much swing it needs to break a bond, and I need mine."

June eyed the axe fearfully. "Does it really break bonds?"

"That's what I'm told. I've never used it before, so you'll be the experiment." I winked, and her eyes widened enough that I had to turn around to stop from laughing and ruining the effect.

"Elizabeth … what about the others?" she asked.

"What about them?"

"If I agree to letting you break my vow and telling you all I know, I want you to ensure no harm comes to Maeve. The others … they are far too gone. They believe too much. They can't see him for what he is, no matter

how badly he treats us, but still… They are my family, and I don't want to lose them like we've lost Mary. Can you promise you won't hurt others if you come across them?"

"I won't hurt them. They will be taken into council custody and put on trial. If sentenced, they'll go to prison."

"It's better than death." Her eyes cut to me, and she asked, "And you?"

I put my hands up and shook my head. "I can't promise anything. This isn't a vow, and I won't make one to you. I don't want to hurt anyone, but I will defend myself. If they attack me because they think you are dead, I will fight to protect myself and my family."

She considered that for a few moments before nodding. "If after you break my vow with Fafnir, you vow to rescue Maeve, I'll tell you everything and even help you create something to work against his magic, if there is such a thing."

Ignoring that strange caveat, I shook my head again. "I won't vow anything because you don't need one. By the time you've told us everything, you'll see our plan to get Maeve and know you're on the right side."

She pursed her lips but couldn't argue. "Fine. Do it."

"Great! I don't have a clue how to work this thing, so let me know if you feel a bond breaking, okay?"

I swung the axe in front of her as if I were chopping wood, stopping before the blade could hit the floor. I looked up at the witch expectantly. She blinked, looking bored, and I assumed it didn't work.

"I wish this thing came with instructions," I muttered, getting pissed off it didn't work on the first try. I turned the axe over, examining the blade and the handle for some kind of how-to guide.

"Vows are often made when touching, like a handshake, and settle into the skin, remember?" Elizabeth remarked, reminding me of the vow we made when we first met.

June huffed a laugh. "Teaching a male witch basic magic when he's already so old is rather embarrassing, Elizabeth."

"Old? You're calling me old?" I gaped at her.

We've completely lost the respect and fear a captive should have for their captors.

"Charlie, try to imagine the bond glowing in the skin of her forearm. Imagine you can pull it out, like Clawdia, Zaide, and Baelen can see

threads, and pull on it."

I frowned. "Thanks for making me feel left out."

"Focus."

I sighed and moved behind the chair, to where June's fingers wiggle nervously outside of the rope pinning her to the chair. Shifting the axe in my grip, I closed my eyes and did as I was told. I imagined the silver glow of June's vow under the skin of her arm and then imagined it shifted to the outside of her skin, wrapping around her wrist like a chain with a lead that moved past me toward wherever Fafnir was.

Then, without opening my eyes, I brought the axe down, slicing through the silver bond. Its glow died, and it melted away.

"Ahhhh, my hand! You cut off my hand, you lunatic!"

CHAPTER 17

CHARLIE

There wasn't a severed hand on the floor, and blood hadn't squirted me in the face like ketchup, yet the screams coming from June suggested otherwise.

"Oh my God! Stop screaming!" I shouted, dropping the axe to the floor and double-checking that her hand was, in fact, firmly attached to her body. I poked it as her fingers wiggled and her wrists twisted in the ropes, but she continued to writhe on the chair, screaming. "Your hand is fine, you wuss."

Elizabeth spoke behind her hand, her eyes wide. "I expect she felt the bond break. Hence the screaming."

"She's lost her powers?" I asked.

Her lips twisted. "I hope not."

"Maybe we should untie her." Elizabeth looked surprised at my generous offer, but it was a self-serving suggestion to stop June's shrieks from shredding my ear drum. I continued, "If she's lost her powers, then she can't do shit anyway."

"You just feel sorry for her because she's screaming."

I quirked a half smile and replied, "I'm having Vietnam flashbacks."

I took Elizabeth's hand wave as instructed and released the spelled ropes around June's body, but as I unlooped them, loosening them and setting her free, June only squirmed more as though I was tightening them.

"Let me go. You've taken my hand!" she screamed. "Elizabeth, he's taken my hand. Goddess, save me."

"And I thought I was dramatic," I muttered.

I picked up her arms, which she continued to keep behind the chair despite no longer being restrained and threw them to her front so her hands fell into her lap.

But when I circled the chair to see why she was still screaming about her hand, I saw she had her eyes shut and she was shaking her head like a drunk when you try to feed them water.

“Stop it.” I tapped her check in a light slap, and her eyes, full of tears, opened. “Look.” I picked up her hand and waved it in front of her. “Your hand is right here. Stop crying, and you might see it.”

She pulled her hand out of my grip and then held it in her other palm. She leaned closer to examine it, and for a brief, blissful moment, there was peace and quiet.

Until she screamed again and threw her hand off her lap, her knuckles knocking the wooden leg of the chair, and then she … melted, sliding off the chair like a piece of hot cheese on a burger.

Rolling around on the floor, she cried, “It’s not my hand. You chopped off my hand. I trusted you, and you chopped off my hand.”

I looked at my birth mother for help, but she shrugged, looking bewildered and amused. “Maybe it’s some kind of magical whiplash reaction from the breaking?”

“You don’t sound sure.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You checked the axe for instructions, so you know as much as I do.”

I sighed, dragging my hand through my hair as the witch on the floor rolled from side-to-side crying, “My hand. My hand.”

I pointed at her. “She can’t tell us anything like this. It’s like she’s drunk.”

Elizabeth brightened. “Water. Food. Maybe we can sober her up?” Before I could reply, she was heading to the kitchen, saying, “I’ll get something.”

At times like this, I wished I carried earplugs. June’s screeching cries made me want to tear my ears off and quit drinking.

No way I’ve ever embarrassed myself like this when drunk. No way.

Could I even get drunk now? Does having a dragon give me a better metabolism for processing alcohol?

Is that just something authors like to add to shifter stories so their readers can rest assured that their book boyfriends won’t leave for hours to

go to the pub like their husbands do?

Come to think of it, Dralie was being really quiet. I didn't want him to feel like he couldn't pipe up on normal day-to-day things. *Not that a witch screaming about her lost hand after I chopped her bond is normal or day-to-day, but still…*

"Dralie? You okay in there, bud?"

"Yes." Dralie answered, and I could feel him stretch in my mind with a yawn. *"Why do you ask? Am I required?"*

"No. I'm out here interrogating a witch and being hilarious, and you're not patting me on the back or anything, so I thought something happened to you."

"Dragons do not spend so much time awake unless in danger. We prefer to stay around our hoard and nap. Since you are not in danger, I took a nap."

"I'm kind of jealous."

He didn't reply for a moment, but when he did, he turned me to butter. *"You are doing what is necessary to protect our family. I envy this also. But then it will be my turn to contribute, and I will be well rested to ensure I do my best for you all."*

"You are just the cutest, you know that? You're going to ruin all my street cred."

"Drakorians aren't cute, Charlie. We are fierce."

As I was chatting to my dragon, Elizabeth had returned with water and toast for her cousin, who shoved it into her mouth as she lay on the floor like a toddler. We waited as she chewed and swallowed, and the crazy eventually seemed to leave her eyes.

She looked at her hand and wiggled her fingers, then sat up, finished the toast, downed the glass of water, and sighed, closing her eyes and leaning against the pink wall.

Elizabeth and I exchanged a nervous glance. I half hoped she'd fallen asleep so we could continue the interrogation tomorrow. The smell of toast made my belly grumble, and I wanted my own meal, but sure enough, June opened her eyes and grimaced.

"Sorry," she whispered. "I'm not sure what happened."

I pressed my lips together to stop from laughing. Her clear embarrassment reminded me of just how fucking crazy that was.

I choked out, "Happens to the best of us."

Elizabeth cut me a sharp look and then turned to her cousin, joining her on the floor and sitting cross-legged. “How do you feel? Did it work or…” She didn’t want to ask if June had lost her powers, but we both knew she was.

June opened her palm, and a little circle of light formed on her palm. “I still have my power. The vow broke, and even though it was excruciating and the aftereffects were horribly embarrassing, I want to thank you. I haven’t been able to voice my dissent despite feeling it, and it’s been difficult. I felt like my body wasn’t my own.”

“I can understand this has been hard for you.” Elizabeth patted June’s hand. “Tell us how this started. What did he write in the diaries that made you turn against us?”

“There were … lots of reasons. The unhappiness with our family didn’t just appear. I thought you’d understand after aborting your boy.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I didn’t.”

I took my cue and waved. “Hello. We’ve not been properly introduced. Charlie. Boy. Not dead. Witch and dragon. Elizabeth’s son. Nice to meet you.”

June’s mouth dropped open, and the sound of a cartoon anchor should have accompanied it. Her eyes flicked from me to Elizabeth and back like she was looking for proof in our faces.

“I gave him away rather than abort him,” Elizabeth clarified.

“You are the other dragon,” June whispered, suddenly looking afraid.

“That’s more like it! That’s the fear we should see in a captive. Finally, taking me seriously.”

“It’s more likely she takes the threat of me seriously.”

“Don’t ruin this for me.”

“I have a dragon, yes,” I replied out loud, smiling.

Elizabeth shot me a glare. “You can stop looking so pleased with yourself.”

I shrugged. “It’s nice to feel special.”

Elizabeth drew June’s attention back as she said, “I’m … sorry.”

“What?”

“In some ways, you were right about our family and your reason for leaving. We were stagnating. We were pointless and so loyal to the traditions of our past, so fearful of misstep, that we forgot our purpose as

powerful witches in society. You might be glad to know that I've changed that."

"What do you mean? How have you changed anything?"

"I'm now the temporary witch representative. I'm working with the council to protect the witches who were involved in the ceremony under Deborah's leadership, and I'm going to be contacting covens and making sure we are better educated on our past and abilities."

June blinked like she had something stuck in her eye. "You—you're head? You left your portal unprotected?"

"Not entirely. I was reminded that working with supernaturals will aid my family and the realms far more than I can help giving advice from my portal. I made a choice to support them."

"That's all we wanted … deep down. We just wanted the freedom to choose our life. We chose a way out." June teared up.

Elizabeth's voice softened. "You left the family, abandoned your portals, and followed a plan laid out in the diary of an ancestor we knew to be terrible … to be free?"

June knotted her fingers and looked into her lap as she explained. "We hated being chained to tradition for nothing. Everyone in the witching community thought we were dead, so for all the knowledge and power we had, there was no prestige and no change or growth or stretch. There were just endless, empty, blue portals that we watched.

"Fafnir didn't sound terrible in his diaries. He sounded … clever, ambitious, knowledgeable. He started by addressing us as his distant daughters. He said he understood the dreariness of our existence. He explained that he wanted to make a name for himself. He wanted the portals to be busy again, wanted our family to be the guardians of the realm that we should have been, wanted us to have the power his sons did and had a plan to give it to us.

"We didn't know the books were enchanted so anyone who looked at them couldn't stop thinking about them, about Fafnir and his plight. We didn't know it was a lie. We were so bored that we deluded ourselves into believing in his plans and goals. That it would be the best thing for us and the world, and so, eventually, we all turned our backs on you."

It was a nice story, but I wasn't buying it. I crossed my arms and asked, "How could raising a magic-eating dragon ever be good for the world?"

“His diaries focused on the portals being the gates to the interlinked dimensions and that our isolation had dulled the powers of the supernaturals on Earth. He theorized opening the portals for supernaturals and humans would usher in a new wave of power to the world.”

“So, he is after the portals?” I looked at Elizabeth. “Didn’t you say hunters have been gathering around them?”

“Yes.”

“He lied about his true intentions in the diaries. In person…” June rubbed her head. “Honestly, I’m not sure if he’s ever really expressed his real goals. It’s all clouded with misinformation. All I know are his actions. He gave the hunters a way to use technology to find natural portals and pointed them in the right direction.”

He’s already made the magic tech and given it to the hunters? That bastard. I was going to patent magic tech and open a shop.

But thinking back on it, I realized we’d already witnessed the hunters use the tech when they chased us in the woods. Only they were using it to find us, not a portal, so their device must search for all magic. Interesting.

“And the hunters?” I asked. “How did he explain that you’d be getting involved with them and working with them to destroy supernaturals? If my best friend was a wolf shifter, I’d be hesitant to follow someone who thought she was expendable.”

June’s jaw and fists clenched, and she hesitated before answering quietly. “There were many reasons. In the diaries, he explained how he’d set the hunters up to have the technology to find portals and therefore eventually use them. In person, he said he was using them to protect us as he regained his strength and worked to give us the power he promised.”

“The diaries were enchanted. The hunters have technology to hunt portals,” Elizabeth repeated, her jaw tightening with anger. “Did the diaries tell you what to do and when to do it? Collecting the demon fire…”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t instructional. There were suggestions on how to raise him. Ways to collect magic. The location for books on dark magic. Demon fire harvesting hadn’t been happening at the same scale since the war, but we decided it was the simplest way to gather power quickly.”

“So, you convinced Deborah and the entire witch community that they needed to summon and take demon fire again to prepare to raise Sigurd.”

Elizabeth nodded to herself. “How did you know when it was time to raise him?”

“We didn’t. We just saw the disappearances and used that fear, offering the witches a solution. They wanted to be heroes. Fafnir didn’t set a time or date when he was to rise. He simply wanted to rise with the support of his family and when the hunters had evolved enough to cause a genuine threat to the supernaturals.”

We were all silent for a moment until I coughed to cover my stomach rumbling. There wasn’t a window in the garage witch room Winnie had created, but there was a clock, and it was food o’clock.

But first, I needed to know what Fafnir did to Dralie and if that was the reason my bond with Clawdia was strange or if there were side effects for Dralie and me.

“How did he get rid of his dragon? What did he do? Did he tell you why he did it?”

June sighed. “He was gifting it to us. For our loyalty. But nothing happened, and no one changed.”

They thought they could trade a dragon like a Pokémon card?

“I don’t understand why you wanted to be dragons in the first place, but I can promise you Fafnir can never help you in that regard. No dark magic in the world can force your shift because drakorian females don’t change until they find their soul mate. And soul mate finders don’t exist.”

June looked like her whole world was falling apart. “You—you’re lying.”

“I don’t care if you think the moon is cheese, June, but I can tell you for a fact it’s not.” She opened her mouth, but we needed to wrap this up. Yesterday. “Has he explained how he was going to give the rest of you dragons? Or even when? Or is it just a carrot he throws when he sees your wavering loyalty to him?”

“He said we’d go to Drakor and he’d take the dragons from inside them the same way he got rid of his,” she mumbled.

I could feel Dralie listening in and was furious on his behalf. Fafnir didn’t give a fuck about Dralie or the other dragon parts of the drakorian people. He didn’t consider them as victims in his rampage.

“And you didn’t question why he was trying to get rid of his dragon? You didn’t think it’s strange that he wanted to get rid of his dragon if it made him so powerful?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “He wanted to get a more powerful one to transform into. He thought his dragon was weak for someone as powerful as he is and wanted to make room, which is why he separated them and instead controlled him with dark magic.”

“You aren’t weak,” I reminded Dralie as I felt him shrink into himself.

With my teeth gritted, I asked, “How did he do it?”

“We used demon fire and magic he’d drained from other witches and supernaturals since he was risen. Part of the reason the island was raided was in case we needed more magic.”

She gasped, probably seeing the flash of yellow in my eyes as Dralie jumped to the forefront of my mind, both of us horrified to learn that Zaide could have been used to force Dralie out of Fafnir’s body.

Wisely, she hurried on. “He used dark magic to break the bond between them and then he attempted to shift forms… It looked like he was vibrating from one form to another until there was a terrible tear and screams and they were separate. We thought he might die, but the demon fire healed him.”

“And then?” I clenched my fists. “Something else must have happened. It was the same night that the hunters attacked and captured the witches on the island, under your instruction, right?”

She frowned. “How do you—”

I growled the truth before I could think better of it. “Because that dragon is mine now, and I want to know what that bastard put him through.”

“Charlie…” Elizabeth breathed, her eyes wide and mouth open with shock.

Probably shouldn’t have said that.

“It’s not possible.” June shook her head. “He was weak, but he wrapped dark magic around the dragon to bring it fully under his control.”

“He broke our pact, which should have been impossible, but dragons can’t live without a bond. I immediately made a new one and escaped his control.”

“He controlled a mindless beast. An abomination. Not a drakorian.”

Elizabeth gave me a look that suggested we’d talk later and then returned to our captive. “Tell us about dark magic.”

June looked away from me, licking her lips nervously, before answering Elizabeth. “It’s simply magic outlawed due to the questionable ethics of

using it. Witches who follow the Goddess vow to do no harm, but this kind of magic uses pain, creates suffering, and goes against many of the teachings of the Goddess."

"It doesn't turn your soul black or twist you into an evil person if you use it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "The most frightening thing about dark magic is that a seemingly good person can use it just as easily as someone with questionable morals. Magic is a tool, and a tool itself is neither good nor bad. Using it is neither good nor bad. The intent and outcome of actions governs morality."

It made sense, but everyone is the hero in their own story. They might feel they are using dark magic for a greater good, and therefore, the pain and suffering it caused was negated. But that isn't the case.

I could see why there would be a ban on magic like that.

"What are we up against with him?" I asked.

"Dark magic is strong. It can do frightening things, and he has been learning, practicing, and using it for a long time. He can control people, read minds, memories, and plant seeds of doubt or fear in someone's heart. He can take magic from all living things and use it in his spells, potions, and tracking. He's evolved new ways to work magic. Ways to speak with the dead. Cursed people, enchanted objects. Turned rain to fire and crops to dust."

She shuddered, and a chill pricked the hairs on my arms. *She makes him sound like a horseman of the apocalypse.*

"There's a reason he's so confident. He's been holding back while working with the hunters but can easily destroy all who stand in his way, and he'll use the full extent of his knowledge and power to do it."

We fell quiet, June's warning and fear making the room feel cold and dark. Elizabeth and I exchanged a worried glance as I went through the list of things dark magic could do again in my mind.

Clawdia once described Deborah rifling through her mind to find memories of us to know what supernaturals she was with…

"Wait. Did you teach Deborah dark magic?" I asked June.

She admitted it with a nod. "Yes. She wasn't aware we were going to raise Fafnir, but we gave her the same book we gave Karin." June looked between us nervously and finally said, "I don't know what you've planned,

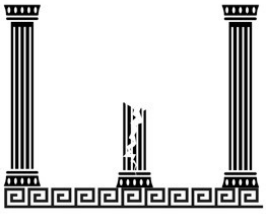
and it’s clear you have access to weapons Fafnir is unaware of, but you can’t underestimate him.”

“You don’t think we can take him?” I asked with a cocky smile.

A smile that died when I saw the grave expression on June’s face as she replied, “It would take a miracle.”

CHAPTER 18

ZAIDE



"How are you, Little Cat?" I asked softly, running my hands over her silken hair.

We'd woken up from a slumber only moments ago but had yet to move. Her hand remained over my heart and her head tucked under my neck, our legs entangled and both of us enjoying the peace of the moment.

The sun was setting outside. The last of the light peered through the gap in the curtains, and from beyond Charlie's bedroom, the murmur of voices informed me that Savida and Daithi had finally left their room.

Clawdia sighed deeply. "There's a lot on my mind."

"Your visions?" I asked.

"Should be my first concern, but our soul mate and his distaste for all this, for me and our future, has made me scared." Her hand turned to a fist, and she swallowed audibly. "Even though I thought I was getting stronger, that I was learning more about myself, becoming more resilient and facing my fears instead of running … I feel like I'm reverting into that scared girl … especially when I see *him*."

Her fear resonated with me. "I, too, have days when I feel the darkness closing in, that my old scared self is closer to the surface, but it's just a moment. It passes. I give myself the freedom to be that slave, to feel the fear and worry, and then I thank that old version for visiting and remember I am different."

"You are incredible, Zaide." She cuddled closer, and I pressed kisses to her forehead.

I smiled, tipping her chin up so she could see my face. “And you are half my soul. If I’m incredible, so are you.” A blush colored her cheeks, and I stroked my fingers over it to cup her jaw. “The female that demanded to come with us to face her vision, who ran first out of the room unknowing if she would charge into Fafnir … that is not a female reverting to fearfulness. You are just as fierce as you’ve always been. I’m proud of you. You were strong.”

Her eyes glistened with tears. “I love you so much, Zaide.”

I lowered my face to hers and brushed a kiss to her soft lips before whispering, “I love you too, Little Cat. Always.”

“I didn’t get to tell you this morning… Congratulations on your bond with Baelen.” Her blush deepened, and I smiled. “How do you feel?”

I sighed happily, feeling the warmth of the bond. There was only one word to describe it. “Complete. I look forward to the days we can be without all the running and hiding and learn to live together as mates.”

“Me too,” she whispered.

“He will get past this,” I assured her. “He’s simply feeling … lost and powerless. It’s not his usual state of being.”

“No. It’s not.”

“I will talk to him.”

“No, Zaide. This is between Baelen and me. Don’t mediate us, because it will only strain his relationship with you.”

I frowned. “I don’t like you in pain. Either of you. If I can help ease that…”

“We will resolve our own issues. I promise.” She patted my chest, her eyes bright with love.

But my stomach growled, ruining the moment. The noise was so loud that Clawdia startled, and before either of us could speak, her stomach made a similar growl.

Her mouth dropped open in horror, and she pressed her hands against it as though to smother the noise. Laughter bubbled out of me until I was holding my own stomach in pain, howling, with tears in my eyes. Clawdia’s giggles turned to snorts, which only set me off laughing again, and it was … perfect.

A moment in time which had no real meaning, no impact on the realms or our future, but brought me immense happiness and peace.

I look forward to many more of those moments.

Rolling out of bed, I pulled Clawdia with me, kissing her forehead. “I think we should eat. Our stomachs shouldn’t complain to each other.”

Savida and Daithi were cuddled on the sofa in the living area when we came down the stairs. They’d turned on the television, and Savida listened intently to the small woman on the screen as she spoke seriously about the rising number of disappearances.

“The number of disappearances reported has increased again today, and like before, it seems to affect people across the globe. After weeks when disappearances had dropped to zero, governments are looking into the causes, speculating about spontaneous deaths or the coordinated efforts of criminal groups. Regardless of what is causing these disappearances, governments are working together to ensure this number doesn’t continue to rise to the number it did previously. Valerie Allsopp reported her husband missing yesterday and had this to say.”

“You are taking advantage of your free day, I see,” I called in greeting to my friends, interrupting the continuing news story.

Clawdia smiled at them as they turned to greet us, but from the corner of my eye, I saw the tightness in her smile as her gaze flicked to the screen. With humans going missing again now that the protector had died, Clawdia felt responsible since her vision didn’t save Sigurd.

I rubbed her back as we approached them, and Daithi returned to hiding his face in Savida’s neck. Savida curled his wing more tightly around his mate.

“Are we needed?” Savida asked, smiling brightly.

“You are not,” I replied as I sat on the sofa. Clawdia kissed my cheek, leaving me to speak with my friends while she headed to the kitchen to prepare something for us to eat.

It had been a long time since we’d spent time together, just the three of us, and it was hard to remember a time before my soul and power had been returned with Clawdia’s bond. But now I had the additional family of a soul mate and, as Charlie put it, a boyfriend-in law, and I no longer clung to my saviors.

Savida smiled cheerfully. “If we aren’t needed, then we will lounge for as long as possible.”

“Wise of you.” I eyed the green-haired faei who had his legs sprawled over his lover and his hand clutched in Savida’s T-shirt while covered in the black leathery wing and hiding his face away from me. It was a manner

quite unlike him, but since Savida didn't seem concerned, I raised a brow and teased, "Daithi seems to think he can attach himself to you, should he press close enough."

Savida chuckled and stroked Daithi's arm. "He's very amorous today. Perhaps he is in heat."

Daithi didn't bother to look at me as I chuckled. "Ah, the famous faei heat. It's quite plausible."

"You are here bothering us because you miss us so terribly?" Daithi muttered, opening one green eye and glaring in my direction.

I didn't miss the longing stares I cast at my friends as they were affectionate in our home or as we traveled. I didn't miss the feeling that I owed them something to save me from slavery. I was a different male now.

A male who didn't cower from his own shadow, and I was glad for it. I did, however, miss the camaraderie we had, our jokes and discussions. We would plan our next trip and get excited about the beings we would meet, the places we would explore, the possibility of finding my family or freeing more titans.

I shrugged. "We are in Charlie's home, sharing the space. Sometimes I will bother you."

"If you are just going to use your eyes so uselessly and stare at us, leave." He closed his eyes again and snuggled deeper into Savida's nook.

Savida didn't share his mate's opinion, because he smiled brightly at me and said, "We heard you laughing. I don't think I've ever heard you laugh so … boisterously. It brings me joy to hear it. What tickled you?"

My lips curved at the memory.

"Clawdia's stomach sounded like a creature hiding in the depths of the Silverveil Mountains." Savida chuckled with me, his movement shaking Daithi's head, but still, the faei didn't move from his mate's side.

He is only this touchy when he's had a vision … but if Savida is not speaking on it, it must not apply to us.

I tilted my head as I considered my friends. "You aren't making plans to go home? The portals are open."

"You want us to go?" Savida asked, surprised.

"I don't want you to leave, but you are in danger here. Won't you feel better away from this, where you can be safe?"

I watched Daithi for signs he was listening. He should have been elated to hear that I was giving him permission to leave, but he didn't move.

“You don’t need us?” Savida frowned, and a flash of hurt crossed my friend’s face.

“We started this journey to find my soul pair. I have you both to thank for that, regardless of your intentions behind it. We’ve succeeded, and you’ve been stuck here throughout all the chaos, but you can leave now. I won’t hold that against you. You’ve both been through enough because of me, and I want you safe. I look forward to the day we can join you for a meal back in Álfheimr.”

Savida blinked, his face scrunched as he looked at the green hair wrapped in his arms and wing. “Are you certain?”

“I would not say otherwise.”

“You don’t hold our actions against us,” he repeated.

I shook my head. “I understand your desire to protect each other. If I could remove Clawdia and the others from this danger, then I would, but they are tied to the success or failure of this realm’s mission.”

“We aren’t leaving,” Daithi stated firmly, meeting my eyes and then Savida’s with the same intense fury.

Both Savida and I frowned at his tone and decision. “Why not?” Savida asked.

He hesitated, his fingers twitched when finally he began, “Because—”

“Dinner’s ready,” Clawdia called from the kitchen. “Can someone get Charlie?”

I opened my mouth to ask why she couldn’t just contact him through their bond, but as she said it, Charlie opened the front door. “No need. I’m here. I must have sensed there was food.” He walked straight past us and headed into the kitchen. I heard the smack of his lips on hers. “What did you make?”

“Beans on toast.”

“Did you add cheese?”

She shook her head as she picked up plates of toast and lay them out on the table. “You don’t have any.”

“Weird. Who’s eaten all the cheese? It won’t be as good without cheese, but I’m starving.”

Savida untangled himself from Daithi and headed to them, a chagrined expression on his face. “I’ll assist you, Clawdia. If cheese is the delicious yellow block, then I’m afraid I ate it, Charlie.”

I followed him in, and Clawdia handed me cutlery, and I began laying those out on the table, too.

“On its own?” Charlie asked, horrified.

“I should have eaten it with something else?” Savida asked innocently.

“You could have at least added a cracker or some bread and pretended not to be a savage,” Charlie scoffed and pointed at the bowl of steaming beans in the middle of the table. “Now my beans are going to be shit.”

“I apologize. I was not aware I should have it with additional food. It was so delicious on its own that I just assumed all humans ate it all at once.”

Clawdia patted his arm. “It’s fine, Savida. You know Charlie is more dramatic when he’s hungry. If you like cheese, you’re in good company in this country.”

Charlie pointed as he pulled out his chair. “Don’t tell him about the cheese festivals. Or the cheese rolling in Gloucestershire.”

Of course, that only made Savida ask about them, so Clawdia did her best to explain as Daithi joined us at the table and we all began assembling our meal.

Charlie paused. “Should I get Baelen?”

“He’s returned?” I asked, surprised Baelen didn’t tell me or check in once he arrived.

“He’s working with Arabella and Lydia on the artifact portal detector thing.”

I contacted him through our bond.

“Baelen, we are sitting down for dinner together, if you want to join us. I’m interested to hear about your day.”

“I’ll be there when I can, Sunset. We are just finishing.”

“He’ll be by soon enough,” I said, and everyone returned to eating. “How did your conversation with our captive go?”

“Captive?” Savida asked, and Clawdia explained to him and Daithi about her vision, the rescue, and Elizabeth’s cousin, who was now our captive.

Then Charlie added, “We learned a lot. Baelen bought me an axe, which I used to break her vow with Fafnir, and she really got talking. She’s going to help with the dark magic counter. Also—” He grimaced as he looked at Clawdia. “—we forgot to mention to Elizabeth that Mary died.”

Clawdia gasped. “Oh no. Is she upset?”

“She’s definitely going to bring it up with us.”

“Great.” She swallowed thickly, and I patted her leg in comfort.

Beans on toast were not very tasty, but Clawdia had made enough for me to have enough helpings that it was filling.

“I’m so tired and full I could fall asleep right here.” She yawned and stretched before leaning her head on my arm.

Charlie laughed. “You are such a granny.”

She glared. “I am not, and I don’t appreciate your cheek.”

“You love my cheeks. You squeeze them when you scream.”

Her mouth dropped open, and her face turned red. “Charlie!”

I couldn’t help but laugh as she buried her face in my arm. I stroked her hair and said, “Go to bed, Little Cat, before you burst into flames.”

“I should wash up,” she mumbled.

“I’ll do it,” I told her and kissed her head. “Rest.”

She looked up at me, love shining in her violet eyes and humming through our bond. “You’re perfect.”

She stood and then lowered her face to kiss me sweetly before going around the table to stand by Charlie.

“Oh, and what do you want with me when you have Mr. Perfect over there?” he asked playfully, pouting and crossing his arms while turning away.

Clawdia smiled and turned his head with a hand through his hair and a touch to his jaw. His hand came up to palm her backside as he pulled her closer. “You’re perfect too, Charlie,” she whispered. She kissed him just as sweetly. “I love you very much.”

“You can’t bullshit a bullshiter, Clawdicat. I’m not perfect. But I love you, too.”

“Perfect for me.” She kissed him again. “Goodnight.”

“I’m glad to see you both sharing so well.” Savida chuckled. “Sharing is an important life skill.”

“Thanks for the words of wisdom, Dad,” Charlie remarked with an exasperated look at me as he began stacking plates.

“I’m also tired. Are you coming to bed, beloved?” Savida asked Daithi as he rubbed his shoulders.

“You’ve had such a hard day…” Charlie muttered, and I smothered a laugh.

“I will assist Charlie and Zaide before I join you.”

That made me freeze, and I looked wide-eyed at my faei friend. Never in my years with them had he offered to help with domestic duties. Charlie seemed to grasp the significance and gave me a subtle pat on the back, which brought me back to life.

Savida's eyes widened, but he nodded, said goodnight, and headed to the stairs.

"You've consummated your bond with Baelen." Daithi began, and my stomach sank. *Did he have a vision about Baelen?* "Congratulations."

"Thank you." I nodded but continued to watch the usually emotionless faei fidget.

Charlie raised his brow at the faei and prompted, "You look like you want to say something."

"You both seem content with your situation, but Zaide, you share Baelen with Clawdia, and you share Clawdia with Charlie. I…"

"You're trying to wrap your head around our dynamic?" I asked, confused about why this would interest him but relieved the conversation wasn't about a vision.

"You haven't been jealous that you have to share Clawdia with two other males? You are happy with your arrangement?" Daithi asked Charlie.

Charlie shrugged. "Takes a bit of getting used to because she can't be everywhere all at once and sometimes I see her with the others and want her in my arms, but that's more of an envious way, not angry jealousy. It works for us."

"You do not feel lesser because you are not her mate or soul pair?"

"Jesus, you aren't pulling any punches." He ran a hand through his hair and admitted, "I used to be more uneasy. We couldn't ever lose our bond without our death, but I suppose I felt like I was accidental rather than intended to be with her. But she never made me feel that way. It was only the voices in my head being dicks." He waved a hand and shook his head. "That's all in the past now. I am her mate. Dralie recognizes her as such, and we are all equals in the bond."

Daithi considered that and then asked, "Being equals doesn't make you upset?"

"Why would it?"

"I couldn't share Savida."

A strangled chuckle escaped me as Charlie grinned and replied, "Doesn't surprise me. Although, you're mates, so I don't think you have to

worry about that."

I interrupted, "You covet him. That's been clear from the beginning in your relationship. You love him, but you also possess him."

Charlie shrugged. "I'm not going to lie and say that if there was an option to have Clawdia for myself, then I would. But it's not an option. Even if we couldn't die, even if it would never hurt the other two, we are family, and we make it work because we love each other." He side-eyed me. "Although I love the guys in a different way."

Daithi's eyes burned brighter for a moment as he nodded. "So, what you're saying is that if you and Clawdia had never met Zaide and Baelen, you wouldn't feel guilty for having her to yourself because no one would be hurt."

Charlie frowned. "That's not what I said. Clawdia wouldn't have even turned human for me to be with her unless you guys hadn't shown up." He crossed his arms and asked, "Why are you asking about this? It's not like you to be so interested in other people's relationships."

"No particular reason," Daithi returned easily, then faked a yawn and stood. "I won't bother you with any more questions. I wish to rejoin my mate in bed. Goodnight."

Charlie's eyes widened, and he nodded to the back door. I wiped the suds from my hands before I followed him outside. He sat on a brick wall that separated the concrete paving from the grass of the garden and I joined him.

"Why are we out here?" I asked.

"Because it's hard to breathe in there with so many people." He sighed and leaned back to look at the stars, the cool wind blowing his hair around his forehead. "What the hell was that?"

"I'm not certain, but it was strange," I replied, staring into the darkness and thinking about my friend. "He said he will not leave even though the portals are open."

"Do you think he's seen something?"

"He's never had a problem telling us his visions before."

The door opened, washing the stone with light, and Baelen stepped out into the garden. "I thought I heard something. What are you both doing out here?"

"Just getting some air. You all done?" Charlie asked.

Baelen nodded as he joined us on the wall. “They’ve worked something out and have enough feathers and stones to start once the app developer finishes.”

“Fast work.”

“They are paying a lot of money, apparently.” Baelen shrugged and then asked, “Where’s Clawdia?”

“In bed. This vision thing is kicking her arse.” We briefly explained what she saw of Fafnir and the witch Sarah, and then Charlie told him that his axe was helpful. Baelen smiled. It meant a lot to him to be of use.

“Have you calmed down now?” I asked.

His face fell, and I regretted it immediately. “Don’t, Zaide.”

I sighed. “I trust you will sort through your emotions, but in the meantime, she suffers not just the weight of this enormous responsibility, but the weight of your anger and disappointment. If I can aid you—”

“I understand. Please.” He put a hand up to stop me. “I spoke to my mother, fathers, and uncle and have resolved some of the anger I have. I will speak with her, so please, don’t get between us. That is not your role.” He hesitated and then smiled so wide his fangs glinted in the moonlight. “Unless we are in the bedroom.”

“Wow, okay,” Charlie interrupted. “Completely forget I’m here.”

“You make it hard to forget you are here when you breathe like an engine,” Baelen returned.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Charlie asked, outraged, and I turned my head to hide my smile.

“I will apologize to her in the morning,” Baelen said softly, “I can’t pretend this has not been difficult for me to come to terms with, considering my past, but I’m going to try and trust that this is a good thing.”

“Our girl is a higher power now, Baelen.” Charlie slapped him on the back. “I get the feeling she’s looking out for us. Everything’s going to work out fine.”

CHAPTER 19

CLAWDIA

I felt… unsettled in the darkness. I wasn't sure where I was and tried to remember exactly what I'd been doing before, but nothing came to mind.

Didn't I go to bed? Is this a dream?

Despite the blackness, I could feel my body, and a draught circled my ankles.

Where is that coming from?

I tried to peer into the pitch but couldn't make anything out, and then a small glimmer appeared in the corner of my eye. I spun around to catch it but fell into the living room.

As though I'd just come out of the office, I stumbled over my feet like a newborn deer and grasped the stair banister to right myself.

Charlie sat on the loveseat facing me, on his phone. He caught my eye as he glanced up and chuckled. "Did you get me a stick of rock?"

"What?" I asked, confused and looking around. Baelen and Zaide cuddled on the sofa and turned around to smile at me … but something felt strange.

"You went on a trip."

I rolled my eyes, but his joking made me feel immediately more at ease. "I swear you are older than me sometimes."

"I've lived on the earth longer, so technically, I am older. You're a weird time traveler. Speaking of which, where did you go?"

"I don't know." I frowned and rubbed my head. "Maybe I had a vision? I don't remember it, though. I swear I just went to bed, and now I'm here. Is

it a dream?”

“Pretty sure it’s not a dream.” Charlie looked at me, concerned. “Baelen?”

My soul mate rose from his seat gracefully and tipped my chin to meet his hypnotic red eyes. “You are missing time?”

“I don’t know. Where have I just been?” I asked. I looked around the room for clues.

Was that bowl there when I left for bed? I couldn’t remember. *Did I even go to bed?*

“You stepped out of the room for a moment,” Zaide told me, also rising to crowd around me, the scar over his eye tightening as he frowned.

That’s not good.

My voice rose as panic flooded through me. “I remember nothing but going to bed and then darkness until just now.”

“Is this a seer thing?” Charlie asked Baelen.

It bothered me that he didn't ask me, but he was probably right to consult someone else, considering I didn’t know what was happening.

“It could be, but I believe my mother always remembered her visions.” He frowned and cupped my jaw, his eyes searching mine. “Losing time could be a sign of some other otherworlder interference.”

My eyes widened. *He’s looking into my eyes to see if a shadow was possessing me as it did him.*

I wracked my brain, searching for signs of something else, another being, but found nothing. My bonds were as they always had been, glowing healthily, and I felt completely in control of myself.

“I don’t think I’m possessed. There’s no one in my head but me.” Another thought occurred to me, and I gasped. “A supernatural couldn’t have made me forget if I had a vision or what I’ve been doing. That’s not possible, right?”

“No one’s here but us,” Zaide replied, stroking my hair and bringing comfort to us both. “I don’t see how it could have happened without us noticing.”

“Maybe it was a spell cast from a distance?” Charlie pulled out his phone. “Let me get Elizabeth here. Maybe she can have a look at you and see if you’ve been spelled.”

I nodded, feeling better knowing there was a plan and someone would come to help. I didn’t enjoy the confusion and brain fog, but I had my

bonds, and the warmth of their bodies surrounding me made me feel safe. I leaned into them and took deep, calming breaths, and Charlie spoke on the phone.

Then everything went up in flames. Literally. Suddenly, the whole place was on fire, and I grasped hold of my men as a scream erupted from me and I backed away from the heat.

What's happening? It was so sudden, the landscape suddenly so hot and hellish, I questioned whether it was a nightmare.

Fafnir strode right through the front door as though he was impervious to the flames, and perhaps he was. I attempted to move, to push us toward the backdoor so we could escape through the garden, but I jolted as my feet refused to follow instruction.

Smoke clouded my vision as Fafnir smiled at us, and despite the heat, ice trickled down my spine, and I shivered. "You're all here. Good. I've been waiting a long time for this." He tilted his head and clarified. "Of course, when I say a long time, I mean the days since you killed my dragon."

"By the sounds of things," Charlie snarled, "you didn't really want it anyway."

I was frozen, but my fingernails bit into the soft flesh of Charlie's arm, begging him not to taunt Fafnir. The building was already on fire. We needed to escape instead of get distracted, even if that meant we needed to fight our way out.

"Hello, descendent. It seems you are my newest dragon recruit. A shame you have to die because I could really use you a dragon, but I'm told your bond with my wife means you'll all die together, and since she's been nothing but a thorn in my side since the moment I clapped eyes on her, you'll need to die with her, I'm afraid."

My wife… Just the term made me feel sick, and from the smile he gave me, he knew it.

"Appreciate the warning, but that will not happen."

Zaide also spoke up. "You're just a witch and a broken soul. You can't harm us."

But he can. He was. The flames licked at our skin, smoke filled our lungs, and fire burned at all the happy memories I had in this house. Fafnir stared at us like he'd won, like he knew this was the moment it all ended.

I hoped he was wrong … but he wasn't.

“I don’t need a dragon to be powerful. Dark magic is so much more powerful that you can imagine. Let me demonstrate.”

The fire stopped, vanishing as though it had never been there. Then he pointed at Baelen, who went ramrod straight like he was caught in an invisible grip.

“Baelen, I heard you have some interesting objects that could be of use to me. I don’t want them damaged in the fire.” Fafnir’s smile turned vicious. “Get them for me.”

Baelen let out a cry as his body moved without his permission and he walked away from us. Having been possessed before by the shadow king, I knew being controlled by Fafnir and handing over his artifacts was a kind of torture for Baelen.

As I gasped and tried to reach my mate, I suddenly remembered I wasn’t as helpless as I once was.

He might have dark magic, but I could see the threads of the universe and manipulate them. I’d used Baelen’s blood threads against Fafnir before to make him slap himself, but a slap would not help us win the day. I needed to do to Fafnir what I did to his dragon and drain the blood from his body.

Yet when I reached for the threads, when I tried to attack him, to kill him once and for all, they were gone. I couldn’t see threads of healing or of blood. And when I tried to reach out to Zaide to ask him if he also couldn’t use the threads, our bond was dull, muted.

How has he stopped us from using our power? But I didn’t have time to consider the question because panic rose to block my throat. *I can’t move, can’t use my power, can’t talk to my bonds… What should I do?*

To make matters worse, witches poured in from the front door like ants, and Fafnir greeted them with a smile.

“Find your kidnapped cousin,” he ordered, and an older witch who looked the most like Elizabeth and another who reminded me of Mary left the house.

“Find out where the other witches have been hidden. He knows.” He pointed at Charlie, and another of Fafnir’s followers approached him. I recognized what was happening. Deborah did the same spell to me, and I remembered how frightening it was to have my mind violated as she searched for information.

“Leave him alone!” I shouted and struggled against whatever held me to the floor.

“Leave him alone?” Fafnir repeated, as though surprised. “This is the least of what I’m planning to do to you, Margaret. And you’ll deserve every single thing.”

I was forced to my knees, something powerful pulling me into a low bow on the floor in front of Fafnir. He laughed. “This is more like it. If only you could have been so submissive when I married you.”

Humiliation was the last thing I felt as, from the corner of my eye, I saw Zaide struggling against other witches as they attempted to force him into a cage. On my other side, Charlie collapsed, and a cage spell formed around him.

“They are in multiple safe houses. We can force the faei upstairs to portal us to most of them once they are dead.”

Unable to move, I stared up at the man who caused my death through abuse and fear. Hope faded and fear quivered inside me.

I’m so sorry, I tried to tell my men through our bond, but they couldn’t hear me. Fafnir had even taken my last words to them.

Baelen returned, walking stiffly, and handed over his artifacts like he was a puppet on a string. Then he was pushed into sharing the magic cage with Zaide.

One witch sneered as they passed us and headed upstairs to capture Daithi and Savida while three others stood behind my bonds. Fafnir’s face was as blank as a piece of paper, his emotions—if he had any at all—carefully concealed as he bent to tip my chin so I stared into his dark eyes.

“You’ve done this to yourself. You could have left me alone, but you had to involve yourself in my business. You killed my dragon. You killed my descendant. You caused the fallout with the hunters, and all I wanted…” Tears made my sight blurry, but I saw as he clenched his fists and hissed in anger. “But you ruined it. So, I’ll ruin you. And you’ll watch your mates die like I watched my dreams crumble.”

My mouth opened in a scream as the witches materialized knives, ones that looked like that killed Winnie, and, without hesitation, sliced them across my mate, my soul pair, and my witch’s throat. Our bonds became unmuted, and their fear, regret, and helplessness pressed into me as if they were my own. They could have been my own.

It was worse than when Winnie died. The pain was unbearable. We shouldn't have been conscious. Our minds shouldn't have taken it, but we held on to each other. We held on to the bonds because letting go would mean the end. We wanted to say goodbye.

"Love you, Little Cat. Forever."

"Until our next life, Sunlight."

"You were the best thing in my life, Clawdicat. Thank you."

I choked on my tears, and through the blurry vision, I watched a slow grin appear on Fafnir's face, his face alight with the misery he caused.

He might have been a mistreated child, but he had changed through his deaths, through his long life, and he was no longer the boy worthy of sympathy. He was an evil, cruel person, and I hoped all the suffering he reaped came back to him tenfold. I cursed him with it as we died.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you all. I'll wait for you in our next life."

As the blood from their bodies pooled around us, my breathing got weaker. I squirmed to get close to them, their gazes following me as I curled up between them. They couldn't talk. Charlie's brown eyes fluttered closed forevermore, and I gasped as our souls separated like a knife severed the bond between us.

No! I cried. *Charlie! Charlie!*

Zaide and Baelen grasped my hands and squeezed as they, too, succumbed to death, my breath hiccupped, and I was glad I wouldn't suffer seeing their last breaths too. We would go together. We would join Charlie in the beyond soon.

* * *

I WOKE UP SCREAMING.

Being tangled in sheets only seemed to make my panic worse, and I fought to escape, wailing at the top of my lungs, the fear, and pain and sadness from my dream still with me, buried deep in my mind.

I was so distressed I didn't realize I was fighting Charlie too.

Charlie trapped my arms and shushed me. "Clawdia. Clawdia. Calm down. It was a dream. You're okay."

The office door flung open, and Zaide charged into the dark, his scars glowing as he crawled across the mattress to get to me. “What is happening? Why is she screaming?”

Baelen’s voice was distant. “Clawdia?”

I was shaking and crying just as I had in the dream, except now, I felt sick too.

“Little Cat. You are well. We won’t let anyone hurt you. Calm yourself.” Zaide nuzzled into my hair and pressed slow, gentle kisses to my brow.

“It was you. You were hurt,” I whispered. My stomach lurched, and I had to close my mouth to hold back vomit.

“Me?” Charlie whispered.

“All of you.” And this time, I couldn’t stop the sick from rising. They released me, and I dived from the bed in the office and raced up the stairs and into the bathroom just in time for my head to go into the bowl of the toilet.

Of course, Zaide followed me to hold my hair and rub my back as I heaved. Breathless and tearful, I rested my head on the seat and tried to take deep, calming breaths.

They are here. They are safe. They aren’t dead. Fafnir can’t find us … yet.

“You want to tell us what happened, Clawdicat?” Charlie asked from the doorway.

I nodded weakly and used Zaide to hold me up as I rinsed my mouth and brushed my teeth before heading to the bedroom where Zaide and Baelen had been sleeping and crawling into the middle of the bed between my mate and my witch. I nuzzled into Charlie’s neck. The smell of him was enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“It was so real,” I began in a whisper. My lips brushed the skin of his neck, and his pulse beat against my lips, reminding me he was alive and well. “I was in the living room, and you were all acting like yourselves, and it felt real. Then Fafnir and his witches turned up, and you all died.”

“You didn’t die?” Baelen asked slowly.

“I died too, but not before Charlie.”

“But it was only a dream, right?”

“It felt like our souls were severed. I felt everything. It was … awful.” I hiccupped a sob and tried to prevent the following tears as their hands

roamed my body in soothing strokes. “I don’t know if it was a dream. I think it was a vision. I think Fafnir finds out where we are and what we are doing and kills us.”

* * *

LATER, when I’d cried out all I could, I still wasn’t sure if it was a dream or a vision, but considering the detail, I was leaning toward vision. I wanted to speak to Nisha and wished I could call her as easily as Charlie picked up the phone, but even if I could contact her, I wasn’t sure if she’d be well enough to help.

Zaide helped me get dressed and ready for the day, combing my hair in long soothing strokes that made me feel loved and cared for. My eyes were swollen, and my stomach rumbled with hunger by the time he held my hand and pulled me out of the room.

As I stepped toward the stairs, I glimpsed the front door, the living room floor, and the office door. I froze in place as images struck me. Flashes of my vision/dream, but they’d slightly changed now.

Definitely a vision. I started shaking, and sickness rose in my throat.

“I—I can’t—” I stuttered.

“What is it, Little Cat?”

“I can’t go down the stairs.” Tears welled in my eyes, and I pressed my palms into them to stop the tears from falling. I felt ridiculous and embarrassed, but I couldn’t get my legs to move. After all the growth and the changes I’d done, I still couldn’t bring myself to face him.

“Your vision is going to come true now?” Baelen asked, alarmed from the bottom of the stairs.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head as my mouth flooded with saliva and my stomach rolled. “I don’t know when it will happen, but I know this is how it starts, and I just can’t do it.”

“You’re being—”

“Don’t,” I snapped and pointed at him, anger suddenly taking over. “Don’t tell me I’m being silly. Don’t make me feel worse for this than I already do. I’m trying to be honest about my feelings. I’m trying to do what you’re asking of me, and if you invalidate me now when I’m so scared I’m shaking, we are going to have worse issues than the visions between us.”

“I—” His bronze face had paled, and his mouth was agape as he tried to find words.

I interrupted again. “I don’t know when this vision may come true, and since your mother looks worse every time I see her, she can’t help me decipher it. I’m terrified. Everything I do is directly relevant to the threat we face and the future we hope to strive for. So, I’m sorry if my fear is making me freeze, if it’s triggering all the horrid helplessness I felt a hundred years ago, and I’m sorry if it’s taking a minute for me to work through all that.”

I spun around, heading for the bathroom, only to enter and find Savida in there, wrapping a towel around his waist. It didn’t stop me from bowing over the bowl again and vomiting all the remaining food and drink out from my body.

Instead of leaving me, Savida stroked my hair and patted my back as I heaved, coughed, and cried. “Are you certain this is normal? I’ve never seen a creature expel so much.”

His concern made me chuckle softly. “I’m fine. I think I’m over the worst of it. I just want to turn my brain off now.”

“Come. We’ll hide you from your bonds.” He helped me up, his wings fluttering nervously as I brushed my teeth. He opened the door and said, “Begone with you. She will see you later. Leave her alone.”

I don’t know who he was talking to, but I was grateful he was trying to protect me. We waited for the footsteps to go down the stairs again, and then he took my hand and pulled me into the guest room, where Daithi lay, propped up in bed, reading a book with a title I couldn’t understand.

He eyed us and asked slowly, “Are you well?”

“I’ve been better,” I replied, standing just in front of the door, not really sure what to do with myself.

Savida was like the wind behind me, swooping and pacing and fluttering as he dressed. “I will return with sustenance,” he announced and pushed me further into the room before leaving.

Daithi placed his book down in his lap and sighed. “I have also been better.”

My brow raised, and I crept closer. “You’ve seen something?”

“I saw something…” He nodded, his pale skin looking glossy as he whispered, “…disturbing.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing about you.” He waved a hand. “It was a vision for Savida and me. I think most would be glad—”

He cut himself short, and I waited for him to continue, to explain, but he didn’t. He remained staring at his book. “Glad of what?” I asked finally.

“I can’t say.”

My lips twisted. I hated not knowing, but if anyone could understand the volatility of visions, it was me.

“I understand,” I began softly. “It’s awful to see a future you don’t want, something you fear. My only advice is what I’m telling myself.”

I took a deep breath and drew on every ounce of courage and fearlessness I had. The kind I felt in my familiar form.

“I’m not going to let it happen. I’m going to pull my big girl pants on, stop letting him scare me, and stop him. I’m going to weave my own fate.”

“I don’t think I can weave this fate differently,” he whispered, and he looked so defeated, so unlike himself, that it made me throw my shoulders back in defiance.

“There’s always a way out of something, Daithi. Believe me,” I told him fiercely. “Change it. Fix it. You’ve seen it. Now you can make sure it never happens.”

CHAPTER 20

BAELEN

Zaide went for a run. He didn't want me to join him and told me he would check in, so I knew he was safe, but I knew the real reason for denying me his company. He wanted to get away before he said or did something he'd regret. I saw his looks of disappointment and anger as he tied his shoes, then slammed the door behind him.

After breakfast, Charlie left to continue helping the team and his birth mother. He'd refused my help also and pinned me to the sofa with a pointed look. "Fix it," was all he commanded, and I knew exactly what he meant.

I didn't react well to her dream or vision. I knew that. I was ready to explain. Apologize. My anger had turned to sadness, and I simply wanted to make this situation better. Especially if her vision would come true and we'd find ourselves in mortal danger yet again.

I didn't want either of us to pass into the next life with regret and anger in our hearts. It shouldn't have taken the thought of losing her for me to acknowledge that the silence I gave her was cruel and unnecessary.

I'm an idiotic male.

My head was in my hands when she eventually left the guest room an hour later, carrying empty bowls. She creeped downstairs and paused when she saw me waiting for her on the sofa but said nothing before walking into the kitchen. I followed her as she placed the bowls in the sink and ran the water.

"I shouldn't have shouted at you this morning. I'm sorry," she said before I could even open my mouth.

"Pardon?"

“I’m sorry,” she repeated so easily I shook my head. It amazed me how she could say everything that felt so difficult for me. She continued, “I’m just having a hard time with the visions and with you, and I took it out on you. I shouldn’t have.”

“Sunlight, I’ve been angry—” I started.

But she cut in. “I know, but I hate this coldness between us. I hate that you’ve barely looked at me or spoken to me. I don’t know how to fix this.” She turned, taking her hands out of the sink, her eyes glossy with tears that ripped at my heart. “Please, can we try to fix this? I don’t think you should stop being angry, but I would rather feel your anger than your indifference.”

I shook my head, confused how my apology was turning out so wrong. Yet instead of assuring her I wasn’t angry, I blundered and said, “I’m not indifferent. I’ve been trying to work through things.”

“Can you work through things while talking to me?”

I sighed. It wasn’t an unreasonable ask, just difficult. “You want me to voice all that hurts me, but I’m not that way. I can’t … say the words. I just…”

She licked her lips and touched my arm. Then, even without our bond giving her clues about my emotions, she spoke them for me.

“You are angry because you are afraid. You are afraid my visions are going to cause the same disconnect that your mother and fathers had in their relationship and ultimately ruin it. You are afraid of losing me, but I promise you, here and now, you’ll never lose me unless I’m coming with you to our next life.”

I froze, breathing shallowly, my eyes wide as she stepped closer to me with the caution you’d give a wild animal. She moved her hand from my arm to my chest, over my heart.

“I swear, I will tell you about visions I can share, and once all this is over, I’m sure the visions will calm down because we won’t be in danger forever.” Her smile quivered, and she lowered her gaze.

“However, the visions I can’t tell you about, the ones where I try to move you into the right place at the right time ... I know those will be more difficult for you to deal with because I’m deciding on your behalf. I’m taking away your choice, your will, and that makes you feel out of control and powerless.”

There was a question in her gaze, but there needn’t have been. She was reading me like a book and pulling me apart like tugging at threads from a

tapestry. I hated it … but I needed it. There was something cathartic about listening to my suffering spelled out in emotions I couldn't voice.

Swallowing, I nodded, and she continued, "I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you, however long or short that might be. I am going to know you like I know myself, and I'm going to use that information to work out what would be best for you and us, what outcome you would prefer, what would make you happiest. Trust my love for you, trust my knowledge of you, and trust that my heart would never want to hurt you. If you can do that, then you'll be able to move past this."

I thought I was past it, but I was wrong, and talking about her visions and their effect on me brought up the same emotions, the same fears, that lingered from my childhood.

I tried to explain my frustrations. "I know you would never intentionally hurt me, but visions … more than the visions. The duty and responsibility of being Fate, of balancing the realms, saving the titans … sometimes that will mean that we and our family are not your priority. It will mean you have to let things happen to us to shape us for our duty and…"

She swallowed thickly and nodded, looking away. "I know, and I hate that. I hate that you've already gone through that with your mother, and I'm scared for our children, who might have to deal with that in the same way. I know they'll be angry when I can't help them, resentful of the power, and hurt that I chose their duty over their emotions."

She closed her eyes briefly. "That will be a fight I have with them one day. But we are having this conversation now. Do you think you won't be able to forgive my doing that to us and them? Can you understand the need for it?"

I rubbed my head. "I understand the need for it. I just know it's going to be hard for us all, and although it wasn't your fault you've been given this curse, I'm resentful of it. I want us to be equals, and I want you to lean on me, but with this power, you have all the control."

"I know, but I feel just as powerless. I can't control this power. I can't control how you feel about it. I can't stop Fafnir from killing us. I can only watch." She bit her lip and clenched her fist over my heart. "I'll learn to control my power and stop him anyway that I can. But you need to know that control isn't permanent. It leans and bends when it weakens or strengthens with circumstance. With my visions, I might have more control

over certain futures, but you will have control in other areas of our life together, and when I'm weak or losing control, I want you to support me."

While I'd originally intended to apologize for my anger and my lack of support that morning, I didn't intend to discuss my emotions or explain myself in any detail. I'd hoped my apology would fix the distance between us and that things would continue as they were.

I didn't realize it wouldn't be enough until I listened to the way Clawdia explained herself, empathized with me, apologized, and reframed my thoughts until I could no longer see a reason for my anger.

She didn't want us to brush the matter aside until the emotions and problems arose again. She was pushing me through them, healing me in a way I didn't know I needed.

It was only fair she received the same treatment.

"I want to support you, too. I will. From now until forever. I'm sorry I haven't been acting like a mate you can rely on. I didn't mean to make you doubt yourself or our relationship. You are the light of my life, and I don't want to be without you."

Her eyes widened as she took a breath that seemed to make her grow. "Really?"

"Of course."

I was heartbroken she'd ever thought otherwise, and I made a promise to myself to be worthy of her and Zaide, to express myself better and not resort to shutting them out when I was overwhelmed or angry.

"I love you, Sunlight." I stroked her cheek, cupping her face and brushing the soft skin with my thumb. I stared into her glassy violet eyes. "You knew how I felt, voiced it, and worked through it all with me, and I can only love you more for understanding me so well and giving me what I need. I'm only sorry I didn't do the same for you." Her eyes searched mine. "Do you doubt me?"

A crease between her brows appeared, and she grimaced. "How am I supposed to interpret anything when you keep our bond closed?"

I really am a fool.

The wall of ice that I'd placed around the bond when I wanted to push her away melted at my command. Like a steady drip, her hurt, fear, love, and understanding passed through the bond, and if I hadn't already realized how unfair and unkind I'd been to her, this would have done it.

She was carrying the most important power in the realms. She was trying to protect us all and keep her own emotions tightly locked up, and yet I'd pushed her away, made her doubt herself, made her weaker and more frightened.

I pulled her into my arms, my heart rejoicing at the familiar warmth of her body pressed against mine, and breathed in her scent like a starved man.

"I'm a fool for shutting you out. Our bond allows us to feel each other in this way so we can see each other at our most vulnerable even when we don't want to be seen, so we understand each other without words." I pulled back so I could look at her face. "You already do that for me without the bond, but I haven't been doing the same. I'm going to change that. I'm going to change a lot."

"I don't want you to change." She frowned and reached up the iron out the crease between my brows. "I love you, Baelen. You're my soul mate, you're strong and brave and dutiful. You're intentional to the point of overthinking, and sometimes emotions paralyze you … but I still wouldn't want you to change. I just want you to hear me, push past the fear, and be with me even when it's hard."

"I hear you. I will be with you until our dying day, and I'll fight to myself and any other adversary who tries to stop that. I swear it to you."

"Fighting yourself might be difficult." She smiled impishly, and the sight set me alight. "You can dodge your fists."

"Fighting myself is the hardest thing I've ever done, and it will continue to be a challenge … but it is the most rewarding, because maybe then I'll be worthy of you." With the small gasp she made, I knew she went to argue, but I pressed my thumb gently over her lips and smiled in the same playful way she did. "And if I dodge my fists, Zaide and Charlie will have no qualms offering me help in that regard."

A giggle escaped her, and the sound warmed my heart.

"Then you forgive me?" she asked quietly, palming my chest.

"Nothing to forgive. I was entirely wrong for treating you like that, for not being there for you when you needed me. I will make it up to you."

"You will? How?" She wriggled in my arms in a way that suggested she already knew how, and although it wasn't my initial idea—that involved a custom ring and the head of Fafnir gift wrapped— it was a good start.

"I can think of a few ways," I said as I bent to kiss her jaw.

“Oh?” she asked breathily as she tipped her neck so I could brush my mouth all over her soft skin.

The ease with which she submitted to me, offered me her neck and blood, had always been a source of amazement and awe. She gave. Her caring, healing nature was the opposite of how I took control and hoarded power, but it was time I changed that.

She shivered and gasped as I ran my fangs over her collarbone and kissed the base of her neck. The smell of her arousal reached me, my mouth watered, and a growl built in the back of my throat.

“I’ll get on my knees for you, Sunlight,” I whispered. “Would you like that?”

“You—you don’t need to do that,” she stammered as I spun her around, placed her against the table edge, and stripped her shirt, baring her pink nipples and pale skin.

She gasped and shivered as I cupped her breasts, played with her peaks, and pressed kisses to her stomach as I sank to my knees in front of her.

“You’ve owned me from the moment I tasted your blood. I might have needed it to control you, but somehow, you’ve turned the shackle so I’m your slave. I need to stop looking for control when it is already yours.”

She stroked my hair and, despite breathing hard, replied steadily, “I don’t want to lead, Baelen. I don’t want to own you or control you. I want you to worship me, trust me, love me because you want to, not because you feel you have to.”

“I want to.” I kissed the inside of her trousered leg, and our bond flooded with arousal and love, so much that my cock ached, as did my teeth. “My love and desire for you are entirely my own.”

“I know. I can feel it in our bond,” she whispered. “Now take off my bottoms and show me.”

The command struck me like lightning, and I growled, my fangs descending as I pulled the material off her legs. Her deliciously wet pink pussy greeted me as I spread her legs, and her scent pulled me further into my beastly lust.

I petted her gently, my fingers gliding over the slippery folds of her sex, and reflexively, her legs tried to close around me as she moaned. But I held them open, held her bare to me, and shuddering, she lay back on the table like the delicious meal she was.

Perfect submissive snack.

I licked her thigh, my hunger overtaking me. “Can I bite you?”

“When have I ever said no?” she replied and sucked her teeth as I teased her clit with a gentle, rhythmic tap on each side.

“This isn’t about me. I’m making up for my poor behavior,” I reminded her.

“You’re giving me pleasure,” she whined. “It’s not about you. Even if you get fed. I’ve missed your bite.”

Who was I to say no?

I sank my teeth into her thigh, and her blood met my tongue, bringing me the taste of sunlight and lighting up my insides. We moaned, and I dipped my finger into her core as I took my fill of her blood. I didn’t want much, just a taste, and after only a few moments, I licked the wound and turned my attention to her center.

My fingers plunged deep, and her wetness dripped down my hand. I licked it until my tongue covered her core, then flicked her clit.

The taste of her pleasure mixed with her blood in my mouth, and the flavor made my eyes roll back. I gripped her thighs and dug in with gusto, licking and sucking on her clit, pulling whimpers and cries that made my blood boil and my cock so hard I couldn’t think straight.

I didn’t need to think. Being hers, loving her, was the easiest thing in the world. She made it so. Responsive and wild when she let go, she was everything I’d ever wanted in a partner, and yet I was luckier still, because she had a soul pair, so I had Zaide as well.

She writhed on the table, her moans echoing around the room, and cupped her breasts. I growled at the sight she made, and when her pussy clamped down on my fingers, I twisted them, stroking against the textured spot inside her and adding another finger so smoothly she choked.

She was close. Our bond made sure I knew it. Her pleasure compounded with my own and pushed me to the brink of my control.

“Baelen!” she cried out, and my cock jumped and throbbed painfully at the lustful sound of her voice.

Her knees started shaking. She was panting, crying, vibrating, and when she screamed her pleasure only moments later, I followed her into oblivion, shuddering with my release.

Breathing heavily but knowing how much she needed touch after her release, I stood and pulled her into my arms. She wrapped her legs and arms around me, and her breathing was uneven as she nuzzled into my chest.

I gently stroked her back until her arms loosened, and she raised her head to meet my eyes. “I’m so glad you aren’t angry with me anymore.”

“Never truly with you,” I promised and kissed her passionately, thoroughly, until my cock was straining for her once more and she ground against my legs.

We stopped, both of us panting, and Clawdia’s eyes widened with panic as the door swung open.

“Clawdia, Elizabeth is asking for you…”

CHAPTER 21

CHARLIE

I froze at the sight of Clawdia naked on my breakfast table and Baelen holding her tight against him.

I narrowed my eyes at him and pointed. “This better mean you apologized and she forgave you.”

They both let out a breath, chuckling and smiling as though they thought I’d get mad at them. I wasn’t mad. I was jealous. Eating Clawdia on my breakfast table had been an unrealized fantasy of mine, but I supposed it made sense that the vampire ate her first … and it was only polite to snack in the kitchen.

Clawdia wriggled back into her trousers and explained, “We both apologized and forgave each other. We’re all right now.”

“Better than.” Baelen kissed her head, looking way too smug for my liking, but I ignored him.

I bent and flicked her shirt at her, which had caught on the knob of my cutlery drawer. “Well, I’m chuffed for you both, but your vision is ringing in my ears, so I need you to talk us through it again, with Elizabeth and the task team.”

“Now? I need to shower,” she protested as I guided her out of the house, Baelen following silently behind us.

Now that he’d made up with her, I knew he was going to play guard dog for a while until he’d felt like he’d made up for being a shitty mate and bringing down the team. From the sounds of things, I was going to be too busy to monitor her, so I was glad he’d be stepping up.

“No time. You can shower later,” I told her and pushed her into Winnie’s house with a tap on her arse.

I was going to be distracted, knowing she had nothing underneath her clothes.

“Smells like the akari,” Dralie complained. *“Our mate should smell of us.”*

“We’ll fuck around later. Now’s not the time.”

“She still can’t hear me,” he noted more quietly.

“No. But we’ll figure it out. It’s going to be fine.” I took a breath. *One thing at a time…*

* * *

CLAWDIA EXPLAINED her vision in front of the task team, her hands knotting and twisting and her voice breaking as she recounted our deaths. It was hard for me to believe the fucker won in any version of reality, and I really didn’t like that.

He doesn’t get to abuse Clawdia and then kill her. He doesn’t get to break his bond with his dragon, only to kill him with me. He doesn’t get to rise from the dead twice, make supernaturals fear for their lives, make hunters stronger, and then win by taking out my family when I just found them.

It’s not going to happen.

I’m going to make sure of it.

As she spoke, I made detailed notes on everything she said. If we wanted a fighting chance to combat this fucker and his squad of wannabe dragon witches, we needed to know exactly what we could do to fight back.

Fire, witches, unable to move, control Baelen to get artifacts, raid my thoughts for locations of the other witches, cages, slashed throat with an enchanted knife.

“So, someone tells him we are here and have artifacts?” Elizabeth asked. “Who could that be?”

“The only people who know that are in these two houses,” Arabella added gravely. “The task team doesn’t know our location, nor do they know exactly what our plan is. They are currently waiting for instruction while in hiding.”

There was a pause as everyone looked at each other with suspicion. My bet was June or Lydia. I couldn't imagine anyone else would betray us like that.

"We could make a vow to swear not to speak of our location? That might prevent it." Elizabeth suggested, but I was already shaking my head.

"It doesn't matter who told him."

"It doesn't?" Clawdia asked.

"No, we want him to know where we are." I grinned at the confused faces surrounding me. "Maybe we don't want him to know about the artifacts, but if we can get him here, like in your vision, we can set a trap."

"Trap? You want to trap him?" Clawdia gasped and flapped her arms like it was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. "And then what?"

I rolled my eyes. "We kill him once and for all. Where did you think we were going with this?"

"I don't understand how my vision of you dying means we should invite him over. Would you like me to lay out some biscuits and hope that's enough for him to walk into a magical cage?" Her chest was heaving as she looked around the room and asked, "Does no one else think that's the most hair-brained plan we've ever had?"

Baelen, who was standing silently behind her, ran his hands over her shoulders and arms to calm her down and whispered something I couldn't hear.

Dralie's voice cut through the silence. *"Our mate is not happy with your plan."*

I sighed. *"She's scared, and I understand why."*

Not caring that everyone else was watching and that this was essentially a war meeting, I held her hand, stroking her knuckles with my thumb, and cupped her cheek with my other, catching her gaze while trapping her between me and Baelen.

"Clawdicat, I know this is scary, but you can see the future, and that's our best weapon against him. That's the trap. For every bad version of the future, we can think of a solution to fix it before it happens. No Jammie Dodgers needed. Not even Fafnir can fuck with Fate."

Her bottom lip trembled as she searched my eyes. "You want me to relive attacks on you, watch you die, again and again so we can find a future where the only one who dies is Fafnir?"

I cringed. *When you put it that way…*

“I know what I’m asking isn’t easy. I’d fucking hate it. I still have nightmares about losing you when Winnie died, but Clawdia, you’re a wonder.” I smiled and shrugged. “I think you can do this.”

She bowed her head and mumbled, “I suppose we have to make sacrifices.”

“That’s my girl.” I kissed her head, then pulled her hand to my lips and kissed that. I joked, “He won’t know what’s hit him. He’ll be too busy monologuing to notice a trap, and then it’ll be all over.”

“This isn’t the *Incredibles*.” She gave me a bored look. “The bad guys don’t monologue.”

I blinked. “Sometimes you surprise me with your pop culture references.”

“We watched it together. It was a good film,” she said softly. Then any joy at the memories vanished from her face, and her expression turned serious. “I just don’t think he’s going to walk into our trap so easily. He’s slippery. He knows about my visions and may have worked out a way around them. Not to mention that I’m still learning about them and how to use them correctly. I think we rely too heavily on my visions when they aren’t reliable and my knowledge of them is minimal. We don’t even know when this will happen.”

I nodded. “That’s true, but from what you’ve told us, he is too angry right now to think clearly. We’ve just kidnapped his witch and his captive. He’s after revenge, plain and simple, and is probably rushing his plans to end us ASAP. That’s what we can use to our advantage. This is it. This is the end.”

“I’m ready for this to be over,” she whispered, “and it’s not that I don’t trust your plan. I just…”

“We aren’t relying entirely on you,” I assured her. “You’ve already given us a head start with things we can combat. We can go through scenarios and plan for the next most likely things. We’ve got June, who’ll know what he’s more likely to do if one option isn’t available to him, and if you have another vision, then it’s just a bonus.”

She nodded but still looked concerned. “I will try to see more. I’ll try to find a path.”

Arabella spoke up, bringing our attention back to the room and the many faces watching us. “There are so many of us here and ready to fight

him, ready to end this, and together, we are more powerful than any dark magic he can conjure. We'll take him down."

I smiled at Clawdia and squeezed her hand. "See? It's all in hand. Go shower while we plan."

She looked down at herself, and I knew that if our bond was working right, she'd have something to say to me about pushing her in front of everyone when looking like she'd just been laid out on the kitchen table and apologized to. She glared, huffed, crossed her arms, and then waved goodbye before heading back to mine with Baelen.

I chuckled to myself as I watched her storm away. I couldn't hear her thoughts or follow her home to make her forget she was ever frustrated with me, which would have been a great pick-me-up, but even without hearing them, I was glad her thoughts were full of me instead of her evil ex.

She needed the break from worrying.

When I turned back to the group, Elizabeth had disappeared, but everyone else was still watching and waiting for my plans to win the day. *I could get used to this kind of power…*

I clapped my hands. "Let's get to work, team. We're going to need something to make the houses and ourselves fire retardant, and Lydia, I think you're the girl for this."

She surprised me by nodding once, then headed toward the garage. I blinked, then turned my attention to June and pointed, "Your first mission ,should you choose to accept it, is to get a secret message to Maeve with your location."

"You want me to tell Maeve where I am?" She raised her brow. "I suppose I could send her a message. Just a location?"

"Nothing else. A message she'll know is from you, with this location. And don't try any funny business, because Elizabeth will be watching." I pointed at her in warning, but when she opened her mouth to protest, I continued, "Then we need to figure out how to capture your family. We need Fafnir isolated and alone without a backup of minions."

"I thought you were only rescuing Maeve," June argued.

"Well, after Clawdia's vision, the first step to changing it is getting rid of the witches that block our power as he kills us. That means they need to go."

She nodded slowly but looked like she wanted to argue. "It's Sunday today. They visit the market on Sundays for a meander and disguise

themselves with magic. It's nothing another witch can't see through. They've been using it to find supernaturals for Fafnir to drain of magic."

"We'll need to move fast, then. Can we get the task teams on this?" I asked Arabella.

She glanced at Isaac and Alcor. "We'll go with Sarah today and get started on this."

Isaac cut me a look. "If they are all together and we capture them, then we shouldn't separate Maeve from the others. If we take them into custody, Maeve will need to go with them in case they realize June isn't dead and is working with us."

June gasped. "That's not what we agreed."

"We agreed to get her away from Fafnir, and that's what we are doing." I told her. "Your situation is a kind of 'work with the police for less time in prison' plea deal right now, but you can't expect that you're all going to get away with the shit you've pulled."

"She could come here and work with me, with you. Have the same deal," she argued, rising from her chair and clenching her fists.

"She didn't know you were working to help her escape. She probably wouldn't want to be here."

Elizabeth sneaked in behind me, making me jump as she said, "Singling her out would be dangerous for her, June. You know that. She and the others are going to be held awaiting trial together. It's the safest place for them."

"You tricked me." June was breathing hard and shaking like we'd told her we were going to kill Maeve instead of take her away from the magic-stealing bastard threatening the realm.

"Is your daughter getting away from Fafnir? Yes." I shook my head. "You've not been tricked, because that's all we agreed. If she wants to spill her guts while she's in custody and help us, then that's going to benefit her, but unfortunately, your daughter isn't the center of the world, and we've got bigger fish to fry."

June really didn't like that answer. After a few moments of shaking and looking around, she sank back into her chair.

"We'll need to arrange transport for them." Arabella had turned to her bunch to discuss the details of their mission, but again, I interrupted.

"You'll need someone to open a portal for you, there and back. Any of them can get you to the market, but depending on where you want to take

them afterward, someone specific will have to be with you for the capturing."

She frowned, not following my genius. "Why? We can just get someone to pick them up and transport them to a supernatural prison." She looked at Isaac while I internally freaked out to discover that a supernatural prison existed.

I still know nothing about supernaturals and how they live here. I'm such a noob.

Isaac replied as he reached for his laptop. "I'm not sure which one is nearest to Sweden, but it shouldn't be too long a journey."

I pointed out the obvious flaw in their plan. "The longer the journey, the easier it is for them to escape."

"There are protections in place to stop prisoners from using their power."

"Have they been tested by dark magic? Do you know for sure it would work against them?"

"Not exactly, but I can't imagine that it would make too much difference."

"Best not to chance it." I rubbed my chin and paced. "I'm assuming you can't have someone just look at pictures of the prison and portal to it? That there are protections around that?"

"Oh." She looked at Isaac and nodded. "Yes. That's a good assumption."

"Thank God, or you'd be primed for a supernatural jailbreak." I chuckled and then continued, "Then all we need to know is the location of the nearest prison from one of the safe houses, and then I can ask the others who opened what portal. You can arrange transport from there, which will hopefully be closer than driving to another country."

Arabella nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good idea."

"Don't look too shocked. I'm a genius," I replied, smiling, and Isaac laughed, but only because he knew it was true. He'd told me himself.

"Do you have all the equipment you'll need to capture them?" Elizabeth asked Arabella.

"I'll double-check if we're low on anything, and maybe you can help me add to the stocks before we go?"

Elizabeth nodded, and I smiled. "I love it when a plan comes together. This is great. I can practically smell victory."

“Don’t get too cocky, Charlie.” Elizabeth warned with a pointed look.

I rolled my eyes and then looked back at June, who was sulking. “Any advice for the task team regarding how to get out of dark magic attacks if they throw them at our friends?”

“Don’t let them,” she replied acerbically, but when Elizabeth sighed behind me, June seemed to soften slightly. She looked out the window as she said, “Countering dark magic spells is the same as countering normal magic. To escape the cage, you have to create your own stronger, more powerful one. It has to come from the same place, with the same intentions as the caster. Empathy and power are the key.

“Dark magic comes from a darker, more desperate place, and there is no limit to its power. It is harder to counter unless you can place yourself in the same emotions, betray the will of the Goddess, and suffer the consequences.”

“Be as twisted as the twisted ones” was not the advice I wanted…

“We can’t counter unless we also use dark magic? Or at least embody the principles?” Elizabeth clarified.

“Your best bet is avoidance entirely.” She shrugged and then added, “But if they use dark magic to evade or fight you, you’ll question why you hold on to your principles in the struggle to survive. Fight fire with fire and dance in the flames. You may even like it.”

She thought she was being cryptic and scaring us with her nonsense, but she was obviously being difficult because she didn't get exactly what she wanted from the deal.

But who the fuck was she kidding after all the shit she’d done with Fafnir? I didn’t care if she had helped us with some information. As soon as it was all over, I was making sure her arse was in supernatural jail.

Arabella surprised me with a growl so low she could have taken on Isaac’s wolf form. “Fafnir and your family have killed, drained, and tortured enough of my people for me to want to do it back. Believe me, if you think us so weak and fragile that we can’t cross to the dark side and use spells that cause pain because of our vows to the Goddess, you are wrong.”

CHAPTER 22

CLAWDIA

Elizabeth called out as I left Winnie's house, and I stopped on the pavement to wait for her.

I was glad to leave. I hated being in front of Lydia, looking bedraggled while she looked lovely with her face made up and fashionable, fitting clothes. I also hated being in Winnie's house without her. It felt … wrong.

Being her familiar had been like a holiday, a spa break where I could heal and become myself again with the support of someone who loved and encouraged me. It gave me the time to recover from my past before more turmoil was thrown my way.

Life was a simple, quiet blessing that I hadn't appreciated until it changed.

I could do with that break now.

"Clawdia," Elizabeth said, catching my arm. "I've been meaning to speak with you."

"Oh?" I asked. But I already knew what she was going to say. Charlie had warned me. So, I threw my shoulders back and steeled myself for the lecture.

"I heard you killed Mary."

"I did," I admitted, then rushed on. "I'm sorry for the loss of your niece, especially since it was me who brought about her death, and I understand you are going to grieve all you knew of her. But I'm not sorry she's dead. She killed her girlfriend, my witch, to create a knife for Fafnir and tried to kill me again while she aided hunters in draining my soul pair. She was evil

and would have done worse, given the chance. I'm glad she's gone, and I will not apologize for it. Nor will I apologize for protecting myself and killing her."

Elizabeth blinked in the same way I'd seen Charlie do. Then she nodded slowly and squeezed my arm. "I didn't expect you to apologize, Clawdia. I do grieve her loss as her aunt who loved her as a girl, but I know what a monster she turned out to be. I'm only sorry you have to live with her death as a stain on your soul."

"You were worried about me?" My relationship with Elizabeth had been fraught, to say the least. I didn't think it was one where she might be concerned about my wellbeing after I killed her niece.

Her brown eyes softened as she took in my face. I'm not sure what she saw. "Taking a life is hard, and you are going through a lot. If you need to talk, I'm here."

"I appreciate that," I replied slowly. "I avenged Winnie, and I'm proud of that, but yes, I've only ever wanted to heal people, not take lives. I've not been thinking about it, to be honest, since there's so much else going on, but I can see that I might … struggle … with my actions later. I'm grateful you thought to check in."

"You have many people who care about you now, Clawdia. Don't forget that."

As I looked to the front door where my soul mate waited for me to join him in the house, I nodded. *I have lots of people who love me, and they are who I'll protect.*

* * *

IF I COULD HAVE TOLD myself a month ago that in twenty-five days, I would walk around on two legs in a supermarket, with two men who adored and guarded me as I stood horrified at the price of milk in the refrigerated section, I wouldn't have believed it.

But here I was doing exactly that.

Various brands of milk each had a different price tag, and my eyes watered to see them. Signs boasted "low prices" and "deal of the day," but they were liars.

"It's extortion," I whisper angrily to Zaide.

Zaide chuckled, stepping forward to avoid someone passing with a trolley behind him. “Charlie assured us he has plenty of money. I think he’ll be able to afford it.”

“It’s not about having the money. It's the principle. A pint of milk was never so expensive in my day.”

Baelen’s squinted from the bright fluorescent lights beaming down on us but laughed as I reluctantly placed a cool bottle into the basket he carried.

“You have to admit that it’s convenient having all your needs in one market open at all hours and never out of stock. I think once the portals are open again, the moneymakers within the realms are going to want to bring this idea home with them.”

My original plan was to distract myself by going to the shop, filling Charlie’s cupboards with food, and cooking a meal for everyone. However, having seen the amount of already prepared food available to buy, I bought essentials as well as easily cooked meals.

I didn’t want everyone to rely on me for food, and most of the cartons said the meals could be cooked in the microwave, which Savida had mastered.

Zaide and Charlie flanked me protectively as we made our way past the crowd, standing around what must have been the bakery counter from the smell of freshly baked bread wafting in the air.

“We should have bought Savida with us. He loves shopping.” Zaide’s comment was almost drowned out by the hum of people’s chatter … and then it stopped.

I stopped in my tracks, unseeing as in a flash I saw something, a vision, a warning. Someone, something black and smokey … a shadow. A shadow … attacked me. It was trying to kill me.

“Sunlight?” Baelen asked, stroking my face as I came to, blinking, my heart lurching with panic.

“Come with me.”

I didn’t think. I darted through the clear plastic drapes that separated the shop from the storage and hurried to an area we wouldn’t be seen, my men following close behind me.

It was brightly lit, but no one was around, and I paused between shelves where most of the packaging around us was white. Then I waited, and as I did, I pulled the vision up in my mind and rewatched.

I will not let him stab and kill me. I won't die from a random shadow attack. I won't.

"What are we doing here, Little Cat?" Zaide whispered. His breath frosted in front of my face.

Baelen explained before I had time to open my mouth. "She's had a vision."

"A shadow is about to attack me. To attempt to kill me," I told them through our bond.

Their posture changed from relaxed to guarded, and they converged to push me against the shelf, protecting me with their bodies, their heat keeping the chill in the room from reaching me.

"There." Baelen pointed toward a corner where the shadows seemed to deepen, swirling unnaturally against the wall.

A tendril of darkness, thinner than a finger but darker than the deepest night, snaked its way across the ceiling, slithering toward us like a sentient thing.

It would have been unnoticeable, but at this point, we were familiar with shadows.

We waited as it moved with unnatural speed, gliding rather than walking across the floor.

"Don't stop me. It doesn't kill me," I told them. Baelen gave me a sharp look, but he nodded once tightly, then faced our enemy.

When it was close enough, it changed from a small blot to a void in the shape of a person with no discernible features. From its center, a thin black cord—like a tether made of smoke—extended outward, ending in what looked like a wickedly sharp blade.

It lunged forward, the black cord whipping toward me with deadly precision. But I'd seen this before and knew exactly what was going to happen and how I'd handle this. Before either of my men could attempt to protect me, I rushed out between them, charging toward the shadow and its tether.

As it attempted to strike me, I dodged in exactly the right way in order to clasp it in my hands as it thrust downward. But my hands around the tether made the shadow freeze and flicker as it tried to escape my grip.

I squeezed, and its cry of pain echoed around the quiet storage room. I quickly glanced around to check we were still alone before questioning the shadow.

“Why did you attack me?” I asked, my voice low and threatening.

The shadow squirmed as he hissed, “How did you know how to immobilize me?”

The voice was dark and deep. *Male.*

“Did Kaatu send you?” Baelen asked.

“You know my king? You dare speak his true, born name?” the shadow spat.

“He invaded my mind and forced me to heal the natural portal to Ombra, so I know him, but we aren’t on friendly terms.” Baelen’s bitterness and anger laced each word, and his red eyes swirled dangerously.

The shadow stopped fighting my grip and stilled. “The shadow portal is open?”

I didn’t loosen my grip, but I changed my tactic. *If he is a shadow that’s been here since the Fall, all he will want is to go home. But first…*

“I will let you go,” I began reasonably. “I’ll even take you to your portal home, but you need to tell me why you attacked me and how.”

“Let me go now, thief,” he snarled. “I owe you nothing.”

“Thief? I haven’t stolen anything.” Indignation took the threat and control out of my tone. Instead, I sounded like someone who had indeed stolen something.

He snarled, and his tether began to twist to escape me again. “You stole magic from our homeland even as it died. You deserve death, and my realm deserves whatever magic it can cling to once you are gone.”

Each word was weighted with centuries of fury and explained exactly how he’d spent his time in this realm.

“You attacked me because I’m a familiar?” I gave a shocked laugh and shook my head. “You kill familiars because you think the shadow magic goes back to your realm?”

Baelen explained with a mockingly sympathetic expression, “Shadow magic was trapped in this realm because the portal was destroyed. Any familiars or animal gods you killed wouldn’t have helped Ombra. The magic would have continued to linger here for witches to take advantage of again and again.”

He stopped wriggling, and from the tilt to his featureless head, I got the impression he was listening.

“I don’t believe you,” came his skeptical retort after a few seconds of silence.

“That’s your prerogative, I suppose, but I’m not arguing with you about it. I know the truth.” I waved the tether in my hand. “What does this do?”

A hiss sounded. “Don’t do that.”

I squeezed again. “You were trying to kill me with it.”

“I believe it’s called a tether,” Baelen said helpfully.

“Isn’t that the part of the magic that Charlie and I used to bond?” I asked Baelen, and he nodded. I squeezed the tether harder. “You were going to hurt me with a bond?”

“A temporary bond.”

“Explain,” I demanded.

“You’ll let me go if I explain? Unharmed? Tether attached?” I didn’t like that he thought this was a negotiation, but I would not harm him.

“Yes.”

“A tether is like a magical extension of ourselves. Shadows use our tethers to bond. It’s our most vulnerable part, and the only thing to hold us without escaping through shadows.”

“And yet you thought to use it as a weapon and leave it open for the taking?” I asked incredulously.

Baelen raised a brow. “That seems unnecessarily risky.”

“Foolish,” Zaide muttered.

“No one should know,” he hissed and wriggled. “I’ve never encountered a supernatural that knew what it was called, let alone how it could be used.”

“Well, we are special.” I chuckled and waved my hand. “Go on. How do you use it as a weapon?”

“Typically, my kind use it to create a permanent bond with a partner, but temporary bonds can be created, and since the bonds share emotions, thoughts, and memories, that can be weaponized.”

“Interesting,” mumbled Baelen.

I clarified. “So, you were going to inflict pain with emotion? Enough to kill?”

“Yes.”

“Sunlight, are you really not furious this male tried to kill you?”

“I’m more angry because he’s been killing familiars pointlessly. I probably shouldn’t let you go for that reason alone, but we had a deal.” I glared at the figure and commanded, “When you go back to your king, tell him that because of your misdeeds while you’ve been in the human realm,

killing who knows how many familiars and animal gods, he now owes us two favors. We will be collecting."

He hesitated, then asked cautiously, "Who are you?"

"Tell him you had the misfortune of encountering Zaide, the first titan in ages to find his soul pair since the fall and future king of Tartarus; Baelen, the powerful akari-titan demigod he possessed and for whom a great debt is now owed for saving his realm; and Clawdia, who has just been given the power of Fate herself."

In the tense silence that followed my declaration, Baelen added, "We may not look like much right now, but one day soon, we will rule the realms. It's best if you aren't on our bad side when that day comes."

"Forgive me. I will tell him," came the quiet, humbled reply.

"Then leave," I snapped. I let him go, and within seconds, he morphed into a blot and disappeared into the dark hidden spaces of the storage room.

Zaide took my hand and pulled us out into the busy corridors of the shop again.

"That was pure brilliance, Sunlight," Baelen whispered earnestly as he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear.

"You were so fierce, Little Cat," Zaide added, also smiling proudly. "A queen," he uttered reverently and kissed my hand.

"You think so?" I asked as a blush rose to my cheeks.

"You were spectacular, and Charlie will be sorry to have missed it," Zaide answered as he picked up the basket and began surveying the shelves again as though nothing had happened.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at their praise. I had acted quickly and confidently, using my powers to defend myself against a threat. It was a reminder that despite feeling lost and unsure about my visions, I was still capable and powerful.

Maybe I will see another future for us, one that tells us how to survive like this one did. Maybe I'll be able to face Fafnir with the same confidence.

"That vision told you exactly how to save yourself?" Baelen asked as we followed Zaide.

"Yes. As though I would have done it anyway, but I wouldn't have known to grasp the tether without seeing the vision."

"It's a paradox."

“I wish other visions were so easy to decode.” I sighed. “Do you think I could talk to your mother? She might help me figure out more about the vision.”

“She seemed well when I saw her. It might make you feel better to discuss it in more detail with her.”

We finished the rest of the shopping without too much issue. I was horrified to see the total price and stumbled when it came time to pay with Charlie’s card, but the whole event made me more confident.

I’m alive, defeating shadows, and being a woman of the modern world. Go me!

Later that evening, when I’d finished making dinner and putting away the food, I sat on the sofa and tried to see another vision of Fafnir.

I was ready. I could face him again. I could see our deaths and not panic.

You know what they say. Pride comes before the fall.

CHAPTER 23

CLAWDIA

The future attack played out in front of me like a play—Fafnir stood sneering in Charlie's entryway, flames burned the house, and we froze, helpless, while the witches battled against the task team outside.

I hadn't realized it at the time, but when Nisha and I walked through Fafnir's past, she did more than help my subconscious show me the secrets of his past. It gave me the experience of vision-walking and the tools to pause, rewind, and examine futures not yet realized, like a film.

Since I had been living the vision before, actively taking part in performance, so to speak, I hadn't noticed that the task team had attempted to save us the first time. But with my confidence renewed after stopping the shadow in the supermarket, I was ready to do the same thing with this vision.

I'd already taken myself out of the vision. No longer part of the play, I was the audience watching myself and my men with calmness as I aimed to direct the scene. To change the future.

I just need to work out how to do that.

"Nisha?" I called once I'd held the moment still. The flames paused mid-flicker, and every detail was visible for interrogation. "I could use your help."

How did I call her into my visions before? She said it was subconscious, but now that I actively tried, she, and the skill to bring her here, eluded me.

My confidence wavered as the vision's edges blurred. Nisha and I had only explored memories—things that had already happened. This was

different, more tenuous, like trying to grasp smoke.

If she can't help me, I'll just have to figure it out on my own.

I willed the vision to rewind, but nothing happened.

Threads. Maybe if I look for bronze threads?

Focusing the same way I used my healing and blood threads, I looked closely at the frozen image, searching for the lines. The threads making up the scene were gold to show it was the future, but as I brushed them with my fingertips, they moved like a curtain, revealing silver and bronze threads behind them.

My hands wrapped around a bronze thread, and suddenly, the scene in front of me rewound. The flames disappeared, and the house reverted to being unburned, while the expressions on everyone's faces shifted from terror to alertness to casual conversation.

I didn't know how I did it, but I thanked my luck or whatever instincts guided me to the correct thread. But I wasn't sure I'd be able to do it again. *This could be my only chance to see a way to stop him before he arrives.*

I moved to follow Fafnir out of the door to find out where he came from, but as I stepped through the frame outside, the vision threads twisted around me, a tangle of gold vines blocking my path and forcing me to return to the original scene.

That's when I felt it—a prickle at the edge of my awareness, as if I was being watched. Something flickered in the corner of my vision—a shadow, a presence, something that didn't belong. I pivoted sharply, trying to focus directly on what I'd glimpsed, but the attack scene materialized again, distracting me.

I didn't stop the scene as it played out because there were subtle differences, which made me pause. This time, the witches didn't charge in, and Fafnir was alone.

I frowned and headed to the window to look outside, but Fafnir's family weren't there, and neither was the task team.

What the—

Golden threads of potential futures shimmered in front of me again as I turned back to the scene. One tugged at me, hypnotizing me with its light, until I reached out to grab it. The thread was warm to the touch and pulsing with a different energy.

Then the scene reformed, and this time, the witches were outside fighting the task team, but when Fafnir cast a spell to set the house on fire,

the flames parted around us like water flowing around stones in a stream. I watched, fascinated and confused, as the flames licked harmlessly at our feet, never touching flesh.

Awe made me gasp as I realized this was the future actively changing.

Charlie. It has to be Charlie. He was working on protection spells, defense strategies, and plans for the coming confrontation. Each decision he made, each spell he researched or alliance he forged, altered the potential futures in real time.

I'd witnessed nothing like it. Nisha had told me I could see how decisions could affect futures, but seeing it unfold was dizzying. Charlie's plans were rewriting our fates even as I watched, making my attempts to trace Fafnir impossible with my limited knowledge of this new power.

But I wasn't ready to give up yet. Even though the future was changing with Charlie's plans, I still wanted to see a way that we survived, because we still ended up dead in a puddle of blood.

I looked away, nausea rising in my throat at the sight of my mates dead. It was almost worse seeing everything so clearly without the blur of tears and panic. Without it, their pained expressions, fear, sadness, tears, and blood were as clear as crystal.

It will be forever burned into my memory, but if I can prevent this, it would be worth it.

As I searched the threads for another future, I turned and walked around the scene, moving some threads out of the way to look for one shining like the other one had. They tangled around me, each one vying for my attention, but as I brushed past them, they gave me tiny flashes of slightly different versions of events. Nothing that would save us, however.

I became aware of the threads tightening around me. What had begun as gentle guidance now felt restrictive. I felt like a kitten who had knocked over a basket of yarn, only to become hopelessly entangled in the resulting chaos.

The more I struggled to make sense of what I was seeing, the more confused I became. I tried to pull away, but each movement only seemed to entangle me further, the threads wrapping around my limbs like hungry vines.

I tried to withdraw, to pull back to the frozen moment of the attack that I understood, but I was surrounded. I couldn't even see the scene anymore. Gold vines glimmered with scenes, and each touch offered me a glimpse, a

smell, a feeling, a thought of a future. My mind spun, trying to trace back the correct thread, but they all looked identical now.

I was lost.

My breathing quickened, and the threads seemed to respond to my anxiety, constricting further, pulling me deeper into the web of possibilities. I forced myself to still, to calm the frantic energy that only seemed to strengthen the grip of the threads.

That crawling awareness of being observed happened again, adding to my panic. Again, movement teased the periphery of my sight, a darkness sliding just beyond the reach of my direct gaze.

“Who’s there?” My voice sounded thin and strained in the vastness.

Trapped and panicking, I stopped struggling against the threads and instead turned inward, focusing on getting out of this mess.

When Baelen taught us about the dreamscape, he told us that getting lost could mean being lost forever and that dying there meant dying in real life. I had a horrible feeling that the same rules applied to whatever realm I viewed visions in. If that were the case, then I could also be attacked, like Baelen was by shadows.

A shudder of fear ripped through me as the golden vines tightened, but I shut my eyes and pictured Nisha. I knew she was in Tartarus with her mates again, so I imagined the golden apple orchards and the grand palace. I visualized so thoroughly that I felt the wind in my hair and the smell of the meadow where I first met Baelen.

“Clawdia?”

Like a drowning person preaching the water, Nisha’s voice gave me the same relieved reaction. I gasped and opened my eyes, which immediately filled with tears, and as the feeling of being restrained retreated, I rushed into her arms like a child.

She stroked my hair as I sobbed and shook. “Darkness, whatever has happened?”

I clung to her like she only would keep me standing, and she rubbed my back, whispering assurances. When my tears dried and the fear bled away, I felt ready to let her go.

“I’m sorry.” I licked my lips and bowed my head with an exhausted sigh. “It’s been a hard few days.”

The story spilled from me in a rush—the attempt to trace Fafnir’s movements before he attacked us, the multiple futures tangling and trapping

me, the sensation of being watched. As I spoke, Nisha's expression remained calm, but her eyes darkened, becoming almost garnet by the time I finished.

"I remember the overwhelm of visions," she began softly. "I spent months locked in my rooms until I felt I had more control over them and could breathe." She gave me an apologetic smile. "You don't have the luxury of a millennium to learn your new powers for them to benefit you here, and I can't guide you through your future."

"Why not?"

"I'm weaker now, but also because you can only see a future for yourself if you are in danger." At my look of shock, she smiled. "Did you forget?"

"I won't find a future for us where Fafnir doesn't attack because I'm only allowed to look at the ones where I'm in danger." I rubbed my eyes since they were sore, tired, and itchy from crying. "But I couldn't even see when he's coming. How can we prepare if we don't know exactly when he'll be there?"

"Did you see a calendar? The season outside? That can help decipher in the moment.

"Charlie's calendar is in the office. I didn't even think to go in there. Plus, if you've ever been to England, you'd know there are no seasons. Most days are gray or have ten different weather events. It's impossible to tell without seeing flowers and trees." I spun around as though I could march back into the vision. "Maybe I can go back and—"

"No, child." Nisha grasped my wrist. "Futures are always in flux, so the timing could change, just as the situation did. Charlie's plans could bring the attack forward or back. You are doing the right thing preparing for all eventualities. The only certainty is that he will come for you."

Of course he will.

Sighing, I asked, "Dare I ask what you think was watching me?"

"I think you're exhausted and scared. It's highly unlikely anyone hijacked your vision." Her expression was sympathetic and genuine, but I was insulted. I frowned and was about to protest when she patted my arm. "Go back to your mates, and have faith that your power will guide you when you need it most, because it relies on you, too."

I blinked and then sighed. She was right. I was exhausted, and I wanted to sink into the comfort of my men. "I will. Thank you."

“Stay in your familiar form for a while when you get back. It might offer you some reprieve from visions.” She pulled me into another hug, and I relaxed into it. She whispered, “And Clawdia, whatever you have to do, be strong. You can defeat him. It’s your destiny. Keep yourself, your mates, and my son safe.”

* * *

MY EYELIDS FELT WEIGHTED, reluctant to open despite the urgent hands shaking my shoulders. Voices penetrated the fog—Baelen’s seductive tones edged with worry and Zaide’s deeper rumble forming my name over and over like a prayer.

I forced my eyes open, blinking until I could focus on the two faces hovering above me. Baelen’s red eyes burned with worry, and Zaide’s jaw was tight as his purple eyes searched mine.

“There you are,” Baelen said, his dark curls falling forward as he leaned closer. “I was about to invade your dreams if you were gone much longer.”

“How long?” My voice emerged as a croak, my throat dry and uncomfortable.

“It’s the next day. Afternoon,” Zaide answered, his hand moving to cup my cheek. His touch was warm, grounding, and I leaned into it. “You were completely unresponsive. We couldn’t wake you.”

Zaide shifted, gathering me against his chest with effortless strength, and I melted into his embrace, letting his steady heartbeat replace the memory of his horrific death and threads tightening around me.

His chin rested atop my head, and I felt rather than heard his sigh of relief. “How are you feeling, Little Cat?”

“You know,” is all I replied.

He placed the end of his braid in my hand, and I looked at him questioningly. “I promised you could hold my hair when you were feeling scared.”

“I was scared, but I think you need it more than me right now.” I huffed a laugh as I played with the hair, twisting it into patterns and knots, but I could feel his heart racing at my back, his stress and concern echoing through our bond.

“You were so still,” he murmured against my hair. “Too still, even for meditation.”

Baelen sat next to us and picked up my hand to stroke my knuckles. “We were worried about you. Even Daithi said his visions had never lasted so long.”

Charlie walked in holding a bowl of something steaming and smiled at me despite having the same fear in his eyes that I felt in my bonds with the other men.

“I suggested throwing water on you, but Mr. Protective here wouldn’t let me near you with a bucket.” He remarked, nudging Zaide as he handed the bowl to Baelen. “Probably for the best. You might have clawed my eyes out even in your human form, and these eyes are my second-best feature.”

Despite everything, I felt a smile tug at my lips. “Only your second-best?”

“You’re intimately familiar with my best.” He winked, and we all laughed. His lighthearted banter helped ease the lingering tension in the room, and the remaining chill of fear dispersed from my body.

“You must be talking about your heart,” I replied with a soft smile, grateful for him, loving him, and since though our bond wasn’t working properly, I tried to show him with my eyes.

He paused, always surprised by genuine affection, and then bent to press a kiss to my lips. “You can’t be sweet after scaring us half to death. We won’t survive the whiplash.”

Zaide squeezed me. “Little Cat is always sweet.”

Baelen gave me a crooked grin and a raised brow as he said, “I agree.”

Charlie swatted him, and I laughed. “Down, boy. Feed the girl before you feed on her.”

Baelen lifted the spoon to my lips, and my stomach rumbled at the smell of a beef stew. I opened my mouth and allowed him to feed me, enjoying having them so close and caring for me.

After eating enough to satisfy Baelen and my stomach, he asked, “What did you see?”

I explained everything that happened, not holding on to any secrets while their warmth and the warmth of the food in my stomach lulled me into a doze.

Charlie, excited to hear that his plans were working, wanted to get back to the task team and let them know what I’d seen, so he kissed my forehead

and headed to Winnie’s. I was so tired I couldn’t work up any jealousy knowing he was going to be working with his ex-girlfriend.

Baelen and Zaide relaxed into the sofa, and I stretched across them, my mind going fuzzy, when a thought hit me.

If I fall asleep, will I have another vision?

I felt sick at the thought. I wanted a break, a real rest, and if visions could hunt me in human form, I would simply stop being human for a while.

I shifted, my body shrinking with practiced ease, and then stretched luxuriously across Zaide’s lap, both paws splayed and claws gripping the sofa cushion as the last tingles of the transformation faded.

“Little Cat?” Zaide stirred, and when his purple eyes landed on me, he asked, “Why are you a cat?”

“Nisha suggested it would help me stop seeing visions for a while. I just want a break. I’m exhausted.”

“I know, Little Cat.” His large hand ran over my fluffy body, and a purr built in my throat. “Rest.”

Eventually, I was too warm underneath his burning palm and left my men on the sofa while I headed toward the sunlight-soaked spot on the loveseat. I circled the cushion three times, then curled into a tight ball, my nose tucked beneath my tail.

Sleep came quickly, blessedly empty of visions or dreams.

Some indeterminate time later, a change in the room’s energy pulled me reluctantly toward wakefulness. The sun had moved, no longer warming my cushion, and I opened one eye, annoyed at having my nap disturbed.

Then both eyes widened at the sight before me.

Zaide’s hand cupped the back of Baelen’s neck, fingers tangled in dark hair, while Baelen’s palm rested on Zaide’s thigh. Their lips met with a gentle pressure that quickly deepened, Baelen’s usual composure melting into something hungrier. Zaide made a soft sound in the back of his throat —not quite a growl, but something primal.

Zaide’s hand slipped beneath the hem of Baelen’s shirt, revealing a strip of taut abdomen. Baelen’s breath caught audibly, his red eyes fluttering closed for a moment before opening again, darker than before.

The air seemed to thicken and felt charged with an electricity I could taste.

CHAPTER 24

CLAWDIA

I perched on the edge of the loveseat, my tail curled around my paws, and watched them with unblinking eyes. The afternoon sun streamed through Charlie's living room windows, casting Zaide and Baelen in golden light as they explored each other's bodies with unhurried reverence.

My whiskers twitched at every soft gasp, every rustle as they pulled off their shirts to press skin against skin. In my feline form, my senses were heightened—I could smell their desire, thick and heady in the air, and doubled with the lust compounding through our bond, it stirred something primal within me.

"You're still wearing too much," Baelen murmured, his fingers toying with the waistband of Zaide's trousers—the last barrier between them.

Zaide's laugh was soft and a little breathless. "Then you should do something about it."

I watched, entranced, as Zaide lifted his hips to assist, his eyes never leaving Baelen's face, as Baelen slid down Zaide's body, taking the bottoms off him in one smooth motion.

Baelen then stood, his movements graceful and seductive as he removed his own remaining clothing. There was nothing hurried about it, nothing awkward, just the confident motions of someone completely comfortable in their skin. And he had every reason to be.

Zaide reached up, trailing his fingers along Baelen's thigh, up to his hip. "Come back here," he said, voice rough with want, and I shuddered.

Baelen’s bronze skin contrasted beautifully with Zaide’s gold, like dusk meeting dawn. His red eyes gleamed with intensity as returned to the sofa and pulled Zaide closer, their bare chests pressing together. Zaide’s rough fingers trace Baelen’s contours, exploring the taut lines of his chest and the smooth expanse of skin, mapping each muscle with deliberate care.

I narrowed my eyes in approval. *“You’re so beautiful together,”* I thought, sending the sentiment through our bond.

They stopped, their eyes wide as they turned to look at me. If I could have laughed, I would have.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” I said. *“I’m enjoying the show.”*

They exchanged an amused glance. Their appreciation rippled back to me, warm and inviting. Then Zaide’s lips found Baelen’s, and they kissed deep and hungry, growls and gasps escaping them louder than before.

They like knowing I’m watching. They like having me here.

“You’re gorgeous together,” I continued, my mental voice sultry and encouraging. *“I love watching you touch each other.”*

Baelen shifted position, his powerful body moving with fluid grace as he straddled Zaide’s thighs so their cocks pressed together. Zaide let out a choked gasp as he bucked, and his head fell back against the sofa, his throat exposed. Baelen’s fangs grazed the skin there in a way that made Zaide’s breath hitch.

“Tell him what you want,” I encouraged Zaide. *“Would you let him bite you?”*

“No,” Zaide whispered, his voice roughened with desire. “If he bites me, I’ll finish before I’m ready. I want this to last.”

Baelen wasn’t offended. His smile was predatory, possessive, as he nibbled at Zaide’s neck and pinched his nipple. His hand slid between them, grasping them both, and Zaide arched up with a sound that was half gasp, half plea. Then they moved together so their cocks rubbed against each other in the confines of Baelen’s hands.

Zaide’s hand would have been a better choice since his were larger, but Baelen liked to be in control.

The murmur of their breaths grew louder, punctuated by words too low for human ears to catch but crystal clear to my feline senses.

“Like this?” Baelen asked, his voice a low rumble.

“Yes,” Zaide hissed. “Just like that.”

Through our bond, I sent them images of how they looked to me, powerful and beautiful in their pleasure.

Zaide tangled a hand in Baelen's dark hair, pulling him down for another kiss that was all hunger and need. I could see the tension in their bodies, the restraint as they held back, drawing out each sensation as they thrust against each other.

I sat up straighter, my tail twitching as my breathing rose to match theirs, desire building—not the reflected echo of their sensations through our bond, but something entirely my own, hot and insistent.

As they moved together with increasing urgency, sweat glistened on their bodies, and the sound of wet skin sliding against wet skin, of gasping breaths and half-formed words, filled the room. Zaide's hands spread over Baelen's muscular buttocks, kneading them.

"If you were to join us, Sunlight, I'd have you hold Zaide's hands behind his head."

That was all it took. Lust barreled so hard through me that my claws dug into the cushion.

I wanted—needed—to join them, to feel their hands on my skin, not just feel their lust through our bond.

In moments, I stood before them in my human form, naked and unashamed. The air against my bare skin didn't cool the desire burning inside me. Their movements slowed as they watched me, their expressions a mixture of surprise and excitement that sent a thrill through me.

"Clawdia," Zaide breathed, my name a caress on his lips.

Baelen's red eyes burned as they traveled over my body, taking in every curve and plane. "Get over here," he demanded, extending a hand toward me.

Their bodies shifted. Zaide sat up, and Baelen shuffled backward, making space for me between them. As I moved toward them, I felt no nervousness, no hesitation—only the rightness of this moment, of the three of us coming together as we were always meant to.

I took Baelen's offered hand and lowered myself between them, onto Zaide's lap and next to his straining erection, as the heat of their bodies immediately enveloping me like a cocoon. My other hand found his chest, feeling the steady, powerful beat of his heart beneath my palm, and then I was kissing him, a slow exploration that quickly deepened as his hand came up to cup the back of my neck.

His mouth was hot and demanding, his tongue sliding against mine as his fangs grazed my lip. I heard Zaide's intake of breath beside us, felt his hand come to rest on my thigh, a warm weight that anchored me.

When I pulled back from Baelen, I turned immediately to Zaide, giving him the same attention, the same exploration. His kiss was different—softer initially, but with an underlying hunger that matched Baelen's in intensity if not in style. My hands were moving now, one on each of them, mapping the differences in their bodies—Zaide's broad shoulders, Baelen's chiseled chest…

"Touch me," I instructed them as I straddled Zaide. "I want to feel your hands on me."

They needed no further encouragement. Zaide's hands found my breasts, cupping their weight with a reverence that made me arch into his touch. Behind me, Baelen's lips found the sensitive spot where my neck met my shoulder, his fangs grazing the skin there in a way that sent shivers down my spine.

This new position brought me into direct contact with Zaide's arousal, the hard length of him pressing against the most sensitive part of me. I gasped at the contact, and Zaide's eyes darkened as he felt my wetness, his hands tightening on my hips.

"Clawdia," he breathed.

I smiled, pleased by his reaction, then rolled my hips against him in a slow, deliberate motion that dragged a groan from his throat. "I want both of you."

As if summoned by my words, Baelen pressed closer behind me, his chest to my back, his own arousal evident against the curve of my backside. The heat of them seeped into my skin from both sides.

Their movements became synchronized, as if they'd planned this, practiced it. Perhaps they could sense each other's intentions, coordinate without words through our bond. Zaide's mouth found my breast at the same moment Baelen's hand slid around to cup between my legs, his fingers discovering just how ready I was for them.

I gasped, my body arching into their dual touch. The sensation was overwhelming—Zaide's tongue circling my nipple, Baelen's fingers exploring my slick folds. My hands clutched at Zaide's shoulders, seeking an anchor in the storm of sensations threatening to sweep me away.

“So responsive,” Baelen observed, his voice a dark caress against my ear. “So perfect between us.”

I turned my head, seeking Baelen’s mouth again, needing to taste him even as Zaide continued his attention to my breasts. The awkward angle made the kiss messy and hungry, all teeth and tongue and desperation. When we broke apart, I immediately turned back to Zaide, claiming his mouth with equal fervor.

My body was alive with sensation, every nerve ending singing as they touched me. Four hands, two mouths, all focused on my pleasure. It was intoxicating, the power I held over them, the power they held over me in return. A perfect balance of giving and taking.

“Please,” I whispered against Zaide’s mouth, not entirely sure what I was asking for, only knowing that I needed more. Needed all of them.

They seemed to understand, their touches becoming more purposeful, more directed. Baelen’s fingers found my clit and made me cry out as he circled it with just the right pressure, while Zaide’s hands on my hips guided me into a rhythm of rubbing my dripping slit against his cock that sent jolts of pleasure up my spine.

Unable to take anymore teasing, I lowered myself onto him.

The stretch as he entered me drew a gasp from my lips. I sank down inch by inch, allowing my body time to adjust to his size. Zaide’s head fell back against the sofa, his eyes closing briefly as sank into the pleasure.

“You always feel incredible,” he breathed, his eyes opening again to fix on mine.

“As do you,” I replied breathlessly.

A look passed between Baelen and Zaide—some silent communication that I felt echo through our bond. Then Baelen’s hand slid down between my legs where Zaide and I were joined, and his fingers collected the moisture there, stealing some of my slickness. The touch sent a jolt through me, my body tightening around Zaide, who groaned in response.

“Hold still for a moment,” Baelen instructed, his voice gentle but firm.

I complied, stilling my movements on Zaide, though my body trembled with the effort. Baelen’s slick fingers moved higher, circling the tight ring of muscle at my rear entrance.

“Relax,” he murmured close to my ear. “Let me prepare you.”

I took a deep breath, consciously relaxing my muscles as Baelen’s finger breached me slowly. The stretch and burn hovered on the edge

between pleasure and pain, especially while Zaide's large cock occupied my pussy.

"You're doing so well, Little Cat," Zaide encouraged. His voice strained as he stroked my thighs soothingly, his eyes on my face, monitoring my reactions. "So beautiful like this, taking us both."

Baelen worked with careful patience, adding a second finger only when I had fully adjusted to the first. The initial discomfort gradually faded, replaced by a building pleasure that had me pushing back against his hand.

"I think I need a bit more before we attempt this," Baelen said as he pushed me up gently; then with another hand, he grasped Zaide's cock and removed it from my pussy. I gasped, feeling empty yet wanton to see him manhandle us both like that.

"Hold this," Baelen instructed and handed me Zaide's cock between my legs.

Zaide's cock was hard, hot, and wet against my palm. The sound he made when I wrapped my fingers around him—half gasp, half moan—was music to my ears.

Then Baelen nudged me so I was bent over Zaide, my head in his neck, my hands clutching his cock as Baelen suddenly thrust inside my pussy. I gasped and moaned as his hips plowed into me in quick succession, his balls slapping my clit rapidly with the force, all the while keeping a thumb in my arse, keeping me open.

Zaide stroked my hair and back as Baelen used me. He pulled out just as suddenly but quickly took Zaide's cock out of my hands before placing it back in my pussy. I took it easily, and Zaide moaned as my body welcomed him back.

Baelen shifted behind me, positioning himself. The blunt head of his erection replaced his fingers, pressing against my prepared entrance. I tensed involuntarily, my body resisting this new intrusion. Zaide's hands tightening on my hips.

"Go slowly," he advised, though whether he was speaking to Baelen or to me wasn't clear.

"Breathe, Clawdia," Baelen reminded me, stroking his hand down my back. "Push back against me. It will help."

I followed his instruction, taking a deep breath and pushing back slightly as he pressed forward. There was a moment of resistance, and then

my body yielded, allowing him to slip just the tip inside. The stretch was more intense than his fingers had been, a burning that bordered on pain.

“Wait,” I gasped, my hands clutching at Zaide’s shoulders. “Just … give me a moment.”

Both men immediately stilled, their concern flowing through our bond. Zaide’s hands rubbed circles on my thighs, his eyes never leaving my face. “We can stop if it’s too much,” he offered, though I could feel how difficult it was for him to make that suggestion.

I shook my head. “No, I want this. Just need to adjust.”

Baelen’s hands were gentle on my hips, his thumbs brushing lightly against my skin. “There’s no rush,” he assured me. “We have all the time in the world.”

I took several deep breaths, focusing on relaxing my muscles, and slowly, the burning sensation receded, leaving behind a fullness that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. I shifted my hips, gasping at the sensation of having Zaide still inside me while Baelen waited an inch inside my other entrance.

“Better?” Baelen asked, his voice tight with restraint.

“Yes,” I breathed. “You can … keep going. Just go slow.”

He pressed forward with agonizing slowness, entering me by fractions at a time. The careful pace allowed my body to adjust gradually, the discomfort giving way to a strange, intense pleasure. I could feel Zaide inside me as well, the two of them separated by only a thin wall of tissue. The knowledge that I was taking them both was intoxicatingly erotic.

“Darkness, you’re tight, and I can feel Zaide against me.” Baelen groaned when he was finally seated fully inside me. “Are you all right?

I felt stretched to my limits, teetering on the edge between pleasure and pain in a way that had my nerve endings singing.

“I need—” I started, then broke off, unsure how to articulate what I needed.

“Movement?” Baelen suggested, his hands firm on my hips. “Should we try to move together?”

I nodded eagerly. “Yes. Please.”

What followed was a moment of awkward adjustment as we tried to find a rhythm that worked for all three of us. Zaide attempted to thrust up into me at the same moment Baelen pulled back, resulting in a collision of movements that had me gasping in surprise rather than pleasure.

“Sorry, Little Cat,” Zaide said with a breathless laugh. “This is more complicated than I expected.”

“Let me lead,” Baelen suggested. “Zaide, stay still. Clawdia, you set the pace for Zaide, and I’ll follow your rhythm.”

I nodded, grateful for his guidance. With new determination, I lifted myself slightly off Zaide, then sank back down, gasping at the sensation. As I rose again, Baelen pulled back, then pushed forward as I descended. It took a few tries, but gradually, we found a rhythm.

“Oh gods,” I moaned as the awkwardness gave way to the most insane pleasure I’d ever experienced. “That’s … that’s perfect.”

We’ll be doing this again. In a hundred different ways.

“You’re perfect,” Zaide countered, his hands on my breasts now, teasing my nipples in time with our movements. “So perfect, taking both of us like this.”

“It’s—” I gasped as they moved together, hitting depths inside me that had never been touched before. “It’s incredible. So full. So much.”

I watched as Baelen’s hand joined Zaide’s on my hips, and their fingers intertwined as they thrust together. Our rhythm was smoother now, the three of us moving as one. Through our bond, I could feel their pleasure mingling with mine, creating a symphony of sensation that enhanced every touch.

“Yes,” I hissed, my head falling back against Baelen’s shoulder. “Don’t stop.”

“You beg for nothing, Little Cat,” Zaide replied, his voice strained. “Everything I have is yours.”

The front door creaked open, the sound slicing through our cloud of pleasure and making us freeze mid-motion.

There was no time to move, no time to scramble for clothing or dignity.

Charlie walked in, and his brown eyes widened to an almost comical degree as he took in the scene before him.

CHAPTER 25

CHARLIE

From the groans greeting me as I walked through my front door, someone was watching a very adult movie.

But it wasn't a movie.

Clawdia, Zaide, and Baelen were on my sofa and bringing new meaning to the phrase "home entertainment." Their guilty faces and half-naked bodies were all I could see, but I knew what was going on.

I was missing out. Again.

I threw a hand up. "I knew it. Even with a broken bond, I could smell it in the air. I'm out there working hard and saving the world, and you guys are in here fucking without me? I'm hurt. No, I'm crushed."

Clawdia was the first to laugh, then the other two joined her until it turned to moans again.

"Charlie, come here," she said sweetly, smiling in a way that would make me give her the clothes off my back if she asked for them.

I pouted, crossed my arms, and reluctantly approached the threesome. I bit my lip when I saw her impaled on both Baelen and Zaide's cocks. *God, that's a sight. Fuck me.*

I was pissed I missed her taking them for the first time. I'm sure it would have been like watching my favorite porn stars performing live. But when her hands reached over the back of the sofa to grasp my jeans and pull them sharply down, I gasped.

Blood rushed to my cock so fast I was woozy, but my dick was hard and ready to join in the fun.

“I’m less crushed,” I managed to say as she grabbed my cock and stroked it as the other two began thrusting into her again, taking turns to fully fill her. My eyes almost rolled back into my head at the sight, and I shuddered.

“I’m glad you arrived,” she told me, her violet eyes hypnotizing me like she was a snake charmer. “Now I can have you all at the same time.”

She patted the back of my thigh, and I stepped closer, only for her to put her lips around the tip of my cock. I moaned, thrusting further into the wet heat of her mouth and pulling her hair back, out of her face.

“Fuck, Clawdia. God. I can’t believe you’re taking all of us. You’re so fucking perfect stretched out over them. You should see it,” I told her in a growl. “I can’t wait for my turn.”

She moaned, and the vibration rattled through my cock, making my knees shake. I wouldn’t last long. She gagged a little as I hit the back of her throat, and then I was coming so hard my vision blurred.

Considering that two minutes ago I wasn’t even hard, I probably should have been ashamed of my performance, but I wasn’t being graded. And fuck, that was the best two minutes of my life.

Yet in the back of my mind, I knew it could have been even better if our bond was working right.

With my cum dripping from her lips, she cried out as she bowed into Zaide’s chest. Baelen’s hands tightened on her hips, his thrusts making my sofa creak dangerously as his cock plunged in and out of her.

“Let go,” he urged, his lips against her ear. “We’ve got you. Let go for us.”

It was those words that sent her hurtling over the edge, crying out and shaking as she orgasmed. If our bond were working, I’d have felt it like it was my own. I sighed. *God, I miss our bond. Why isn’t it working?*

With so much else going on, I’d pushed it aside, but now it was starting to bother me.

“It’s my fault,” Dralie lamented.

“It’s not your fault. All the crazy just needs to die down first, and then we can fix it. But maybe it’s time to tell them where you came from. No more secrets.”

The other two weren’t far behind her and groaned as they finished.

While I didn’t get the pleasure of feeling her pussy squeeze me as she came, I got the pleasure of seeing her reddened and gaping holes leaking

with cum as they gently pulled out.

"That was…" Zaide began, then shook his head, apparently unable to find words to describe what he'd just experienced. *Lucky fucker.*

"Yes," Baelen agreed. "It was."

"We should probably clean up," Zaide murmured after a few moments of comfortable silence, his fingers playing with a strand of her hair.

I figured since I was the only one standing and mostly dressed, it was my job to get the washcloths, so I hurried to the bathroom, gave myself a quick rinse, dampened a few clothes, and rejoined them. As I handed them out, I was half tempted to ask if they needed snacks and condoms too, but only Clawdia would get the reference.

Baelen's hand continued its idle exploration of Clawdia's skin, while Zaide's chest rose and fell beneath her cheek in a rhythm that was putting her to sleep.

I bent in front of them. "I need to talk to you."

"About what?" Clawdia asked. When she saw my expression, her eyes widened with alarm, and she sat up. "What's wrong?"

"You've been worried about our bond," I started.

"I was worried, but Dralie said it was fine … right?"

I grimaced and admitted, "No. Actually, he's pretty worried about it too. We can see you and know you're safe, so we aren't freaking out … but he's worried."

"Okay…" she drawled, exchanging a look with Baelen and Zaide, who looked just as confused at my outburst.

I probably shouldn't be doing this while they are naked.

"Nudity does not disturb drakorians. There is strength in revealing your most vulnerable parts."

Strength in revealing vulnerability… I sighed and ran a hand through my hair.

"We didn't want to tell you he's worried because he thinks the reason the bond isn't working is because of him. I disagree, but there's no way to prove it."

She frowned. "What do you mean? How could Dralie be messing up the bond?"

"We've not told you something, and I know that's pretty hypocritical of us since we've had a whole powwow about not keeping things secret, but there's not been a right moment."

“You're stalling. Just tell me what it is.” Her narrowed eyes softened, and she squeezed my hand. “I love you, and no matter what you say that won’t change.”

“Dralie was Fafnir’s dragon before he was mine,” I blurted. “The dragon we killed was the mindless body Dralie used to change into, but due to whatever fucked-up magical laws there are in the universe, Dralie’s soul came to me at exactly the time I was being killed.”

“Goodness.” She blinked. “That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“Are you angry?” I asked, searching her eyes. “Don’t be angry. Dralie didn’t see any of the shit Fafnir did to you. Fafnir kept him locked down, and he felt really awful that he couldn’t escape and prevent anything that Fafnir did.”

“I don’t blame Dralie for any of that. I didn’t even think of it. That must have been awful for him.” She stroked my hair like she could comfort Dralie somehow. She was contemplative, not upset, as she sat for a few moments in silence. She asked, “He thinks that’s why our bond is muted?”

“It’s a guilt thing. I don’t think he’s right.”

“What do you think is happening?” Baelen asked, and I almost jumped. I’d forgotten he was there. And naked.

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged and looked back at Clawdia with a crooked grin. “But I’m hoping it comes back soon because I’m missing it.”

She nodded. “It feels strange to not feel you like I used to, and to not hear Dralie.”

“Have you looked at the bond to see if there’s anything wrong with it?” Zaide asked as though something like that would be obvious.

“Pardon?” Clawdia asked, just as surprised as me.

“You didn’t think of that?”

I glared. “No, Smarty Pants.”

Clawdia’s eyes were already cloudy, so I waited for her verdict. “It seems fine. I always thought it was just gold, but there’s a black line around it. Maybe that’s suffocating it?”

“A black line?” I asked, alarmed, thinking about Baelen’s shadow possession and the black patches under his skin.

He must have thought something similar, because he said slowly, “The familiar bond is shadow formed, correct?”

“Yes, but it was a gold line when I pulled it to me,” I replied. “There wasn’t any black around it.”

“Maybe it changed when you mated?” Zaide suggested.

“Who knows? The four of us are just a bunch of impossibilities smushed together. The normal rules don’t seem to apply. We’ll look into it another time.” I glanced at the clock and cringed. “I have to go. I only popped over to ask the guys a favor.”

“What favor?” Zaide asked.

“Well, you,” I said to Baelen, “have been working with the witches on the artifacts and the app and coincidentally opened the portal to the biggest safe house, so they want you to drop the artifacts there for them to distribute and continue the work.” I turned to Zaide. “They’ve also rescued a family who were attacked by hunters, and an elderly witch isn’t recovering well. They are hoping you can help.”

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Clawdia asked, outraged to be left out.

“Of course not. But you literally just got lost in your visions, and I don’t want anyone expending too much energy when we don’t know when Fafnir will attack. Baelen could do all of that alone, but while you were in thread hell, he portaled the task team to Sweden so they could capture Fafnir’s fan group while Zaide helped round them up and portaled some of the team back.”

“You did?” Clawdia gasped excitedly. “They are in prison?”

“On their way there now,” I told her smugly.

“We’ll get dressed and gather the artifacts,” Baelen said.

“You should rest more, Little Cat.” Zaide stroked her hair, and she leaned into it like the feline she was at heart. “You didn’t sleep long.”

“I was glad to wake up when I did.” She giggled, then shrugged as she relaxed against the pillows. “I suppose I shouldn’t complain about being looked after.”

I patted her leg and stood. “We’re a team, a family. That’s what we do.”

Savida called from the top of the stairs, “Has your group intercourse ended? It sounded like wild beasts were tearing through Charlie’s living room.” He peaked over the banister and whispered playfully, a glint in his dark eyes. “I wanted to rescue you, but Daithi thought if you couldn’t defend yourself from such an embarrassing attack, you deserved death.”

I left the house, chuckling to myself. It was probably the post-orgasm endorphins making me happy, but my plans were working, and things seemed to be on the up.

* * *

SOMETHING SMELLED like a combination of cinnamon and expired milk. It turned my stomach.

“Oh God, what is that?” I asked, pinching my nose as I walked into Winnie’s garage.

Lydia sat at the wooden station in the middle of the room, stirring a bubbling cauldron over a portable hob. “It’s your fire-retardant potion. It’s taken a while to get right, but I think I’ve got it now.”

“That’s great. This will protect the entire house?” I asked.

“Every beam, board, and nail,” she confirmed. “Are they going?”

I watched Lydia add three precisely measured drops of something green into the brew; it hissed, and a cloud of noxious gas erupted. We coughed and waved the smoke away, choking on the smell as the mixture continued to bubble like Shrek’s swamp. I didn’t want to know what was in there.

I cringed as I spoke and tasted the air. “Collecting the artifacts and heading there any minute.”

Lydia stirred the potion again until it eventually settled into a smooth, shimmering liquid that resembled liquid copper. Lydia nodded to herself, scribbled something in her notebook, and then turned down the heat on the hob.

“It will just need to simmer for another ten minutes, and then you’ll be able to dose the houses and even yourselves.”

“Thanks.” I rubbed my neck awkwardly. “I know it’s not been ideal working with us and getting dragged into this, but I appreciate your help.”

“I think it’s what Winnie would have wanted, all things considered,” she replied softly.

A sad, grief-stricken expression crossed her face. I nodded. Despite her awful choice in partners, Winnie loved Clawdia and would have wanted to help us survive this. If she’d gotten the chance to find out the truth, I was sure she would have made different choices.

Lydia interrupted my thoughts. “You’re different now.”

“What?” I asked, startled.

“You’ve changed.”

She caught me off guard, and although my first instinct would have been to deflect with something sarcastic about witches and their nosy

perceptions, I didn't. The words died before they reached my lips because, well, she was right. I was different.

"It's been a crazy month. I'm a witch, a dragon, a soul mate. I have a family, relatives. My whole life changed." I gave her a small smile.

"Despite everything, you seem … happy." With her elbow on the table, she leaned her head on her hand and smiled. She didn't give me the same creepy vibes that Karin did when she was flirting. Instead, she seemed happy for me.

I laughed. I wanted to say that the group sex had a lot to do with my current buoyant mood but settled with, "I am."

"You really love her." It was a statement.

"I love her so much it's insane."

"I could tell." She gave a self-deprecating smile and continued, "Even before she was human, you loved her ripping up your sofa and knocking over your glass ornaments. You spent your holidays together, watched films. I was jealous."

"Believe me, she was more jealous of you." As much as it warmed my heart to know Clawdicat was pining after me the whole time, I hated hurting her when I was with Lydia. "Also, that was your glass ornament, and now that we're not together, I can say that I'm glad she did, because it looked more like a cock and balls than an abstract kangaroo."

She gasped, placing a hand on her chest dramatically, and I laughed.

* * *

WE WERE JUST FINISHING LITTERING the fire-retardant potion over Winnie's house. Mine had already been done.

When my phone buzzed in my pocket, my stomach dropped before I even read the message.

"What is it?" Lydia asked, noticing my sudden stillness.

I cleared my throat, but my voice still came out strained. "The witches have escaped their prison transport."

She gasped. "What? How?"

I scanned the rest of the message from Arabella. "Looks like they had outside help. Someone or something disabled the magical cuffs from the inside before they were loaded up. They've left the driver for dead." I

looked up, meeting her eyes. “They’re organizing a team to track and recapture them. They want me in Sweden in thirty minutes for collection.”

“You should go,” Lydia said quietly, reading my hesitation. “You can help track them digitally, and your instincts for finding anything are unparalleled. You’d be an asset.”

She was right. If anyone could help locate the escaped prisoners quickly, it was probably me. But something inside me screamed it was a trap, a trick, and I wasn’t sure what to do.

CHAPTER 26

BAELEN

The portal collapsed behind us, leaving us at the top of a cliff, the wind tossing Zaide's braid to smack me in the stomach. Turbulent waves crashed violently against jagged rocks below, sending salt and spray thirty feet into the air before falling back into the churning waters.

"Are you sure we're in the right place?" Zaide asked as he turned in a slow circle, surveying the area.

The scenery was beautiful. The sun was high in the sky, the cliff surrounded by meadows and trees, but there was no sign of a witch safe house.

A crack echoed around the landscape, scaring creatures high in the treetops that flew away at the sound. Zaide and I jumped to attention, turning toward the sound, ready to defend ourselves, but just beyond a group of large rocks, a head appeared … then rose.

"Where—" Zaide began as we stepped closer.

The figure rose to full height, emerging from the rocks as though she'd crawled out from a hole in the ground. An elderly female, as shown from her gray hair and curved posture, brushed off her clothes and then waved at us.

"Hi there," she said. "Arabella said you'd be bringing the artifacts and might help with…" She paused, glancing at Zaide. "…healing."

"We have the artifacts. I'm assuming she's already told you what you'll need to do with them?" I asked.

“She walked us through the steps, but you might need to show us first,” she explained as we approached. “I’m Laura. I run this safe house.”

“And where exactly is that?” Zaide asked, looking around.

“Down here.” She chuckled and pointed at the ground, which suddenly revealed a hidden door in the rock-face.

She bent and pulled open the door to reveal a stone circular stairwell.

“Please.” She waved for us to go ahead but eyed Zaide again and added, “It might be a squeeze, but I think you’ll fit.”

It was tight, even for me. My arms brushed the frigid rock, and I looked back to see Zaide wriggling his way down the stairs. I had to look away to smother my chuckle.

The door above us slammed shut, and I blinked, adjusting to the change in light easily and with great relief as we emerged from the stairs into a dim corridor. We walked through large ornate doors into what could only be described as an underground palace.

Large windows filled the entire back wall of the safe house, giving the view of the sea outside, the waves crashing up the rocks and spraying the bottom of the glass. We were inside the cliff. Hidden. It was … brilliant.

“Impressive,” Zaide murmured beside me, his voice hushed with genuine appreciation.

“It offers additional security. If anyone approaches by sea, we’ll see them long before they reach us.” Our witch guide stepped around us and smiled with pride. “This sanctuary has been continuously improved for centuries. Each generation adds something while preserving what came before.”

It didn’t look old. The main living area featured comfortable seating arranged in conversation clusters. Small personal touches—handmade blankets, children’s drawings pinned to walls, potted plants transformed what could have been an austere refuge into something approaching a home.

“How many people are currently sheltering here?” I asked, noting several doorways leading to what appeared to be private quarters.

“Twenty-three,” the witch replied. “Mostly individuals, but we have some families who had to be taken in after hunters attacked them.”

She guided us into a room much like Winnie’s witch room, where jars, herbs, and books lined the shelves drilled into the stone walls. In the center

was a dark wooden table, which did look very old. The murmur of female voices abruptly stopped when we entered the room.

“Everyone,” Laura announced, “these gentlemen are going to show us how we can support the efforts to protect our people from otherworld invaders.”

Despite the wariness—in some cases, clear hatred—in the expressions of the witches, I pulled the artifacts from the bag I carried and placed them onto the table. I identified each—firebird feathers, Omphalos stone, and Eldhrimnir, the cauldron—and explained their history and abilities.

I told them how Elizabeth, Arabella, and the other team leaders planned to use the artifacts along with an app which was being created as a warning of portals being created in the area.

All they needed to do to help was devise a plan of where to place the stones and feathers so people were protected. They would also need to assist the app creator if they had any questions. If they needed more, they could use the cauldron to replicate the artifacts, and I demonstrated, placing the feather inside, closing the lid, and pulling out two feathers once I pulled the lid back.

The distrust gave way to awe as the firebird feather glowed, showing its range of colors as though to show off for the audience.

“Thank you for demonstrating.” Laura smiled widely and clapped. “We are eager to get started on this project.” I nodded and stepped back, glancing at Zaide, who leaned against the wall, watching and waiting.

As the witches converged toward the table to touch the artifacts, I frowned, feeling aggrieved that I had to leave my artifacts in these peoples’ possession. I wanted to help the humans and supernaturals of this realm protect themselves from slavers, but I didn’t trust the witches any more than they trusted me. It felt wrong to leave such important artifacts in their hands.

“I’d like for you to visit our injured now, if that’s all right with you,” Laura said, smiling up at Zaide.

“Of course.”

Laura guided us through the passageways until we entered a large room with what I could only assume was human medical equipment. Screens showed lines I didn’t understand and made a continuous beeping noise, which was like a stab to my sensitive ears.

“This is Bridgette.” She gestured to the elderly woman in bed with tubes and wires attached to her. “And this is her daughter, Janice.”

Zaide and I nodded at the female who stood, arms crossed, over her convalescing mother, her expression wary. “Laura, I’m not sure—”

Laura interrupted the witch by addressing us. “Our medical assistant, also a skilled potions witch, is away on a family emergency. While many here have basic first aid knowledge, Bridgette has worsened so much, and we don’t know how to help her without taking her to hospital. Hunters attacked her and her family, and since they escaped, hunters will search hospitals for people with her injuries. You are our last hope of saving her.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Zaide replied solemnly, then turned to Janice. “May I?”

She hesitated only briefly before moving aside. Although she remained close enough to intervene if she saw Zaide do anything she didn’t like.

Zaide kneeled beside the cot, bringing himself level with the patient. Her eyes fluttered open momentarily—clouded with fever and confusion—before sliding closed again. He studied her for several moments, his purple eyes taking on the focused intensity as he looked into her injury.

“She was shot at. In her shoulder.” His hand hovered over the injury. “There is still something in the wound, and it’s infected.” His eyes widened. “Her blood is also infected.”

“Sepsis?” Janice asked, wringing her hands. “That’s serious, right? She could die from that.”

A small sound drew my attention away from Zaide’s reassurances to Janice. In the corner of the room, partially hidden behind another privacy screen, sat a little boy—perhaps five or six years old. His knees were drawn up to his chest, and he clutched a well-loved plush toy. The boy’s eyes were wide and frightened as he stared, his small body trembling slightly.

I crouched down to his eye level, making myself smaller and less intimidating.

“Hello there,” I said softly. “That’s a fine companion you have.”

The boy clutched his plush toy tighter but didn’t retreat further into the corner, which I considered to be a good sign. His blue eyes assessed me with the wariness of a child who had recently learned the world contained dangers he hadn’t previously imagined.

“Does your friend have a name?” I asked when he didn’t immediately respond.

After a moment's consideration, the boy whispered, "Howler."

I smiled, keeping my expression gentle. "Howler. That's an excellent name. Very brave sounding."

A tiny nod.

"Is Howler helping you keep watch?" I asked.

Another nod, slightly more certain. "He protects me from the bad people."

The bad people. Hunters. I didn't have to wonder what this child had witnessed to put that haunted look in his eyes. I saw the same thing in the titan slaves I rescued.

"Howler's doing a good job," I told him. "You picked the right friend."

The boy's grip on the toy loosened fractionally. "Gamma made him for me. She put special things inside to keep me safe."

"Your Gamma is very wise," I said. "And my friend over there—his name is Zaide—he's helping her feel better right now. Would you like to come sit with me where you can see your Gamma better?"

He nodded, and I settled into a chair against the wall, surprised when the boy leaned cautiously against my side. His trust was a fragile, precious thing, and I found myself instinctively placing a protective arm around his small shoulders and pulling him into my lap.

The boy's head grew heavy as exhaustion finally overcame vigilance, and he drifted to sleep, Howler still clutched protectively in his small hands. I adjusted my position to make him more comfortable, continuing my rhythmic patting of his back to keep him settled as Zaide completed his healing work.

"Your control has improved," I noted quietly so as not to wake the child. "The magic doesn't overflow, and you've learned to pinpoint in particular threads in the body in need of healing. It's remarkable how far you've come with your power in such a short time."

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I've been practicing."

"It shows." I watched through the same power as the threads gradually turned green, the elderly witch's face filling with color again, the monitors beeping more regularly. Zaide sagged as he sat on the floor, and I could feel his relief through our bond.

"Where did the witches go?" I asked.

"Laura took Janice to get a cold drink. Apparently, that might help her calm herself."

He turned toward me, his purple eyes studying my face with unexpected intensity. “You know,” he said, his voice lowered for privacy, “I can’t explain why, but you look even more attractive with a child in your arms.”

The comment surprised me. “Is that so?”

His hand found mine, our fingers intertwining. “He needed someone to lean on, and you knew how to comfort him. He will remember this. How you provided feelings of safety when he needed it most…” He squeezed my hand. “You gave him a gift today, Baelen.”

“I’ve never spent much time around children,” I admitted, heat creeping into my cheeks at the sincerity of his compliment. “But he seems like a good one.”

“I agree.” Zaide’s thumb traced circles on the back of my hand. “Brave to watch out for his family while still so scared.”

I glanced down to where the boy slept against my chest, Howler still clutched protectively against his chest, and I eased him over to rest next to his grandmother.

A fear I hadn’t fully realized shifted during those quiet moments of providing comfort to the boy. The fear of being the indifferent father my fathers had been, the fear that my child would hate me as I hate them.

But why would that be true?

Perhaps it was duty that made me care for titans and rescue them. Maybe it was my soul mate bond with titans of a healing nature that influenced me, but regardless of the origin, I was not an indifferent monster. I cared. I couldn’t always articulate that feeling, but I was protective of creatures that were powerless and weak. I saw something in them, something like the parts of me I hid, the desperate child inside, and so I helped them.

My own flesh and blood, even the ones that were not my biological children, would be no exception to my protectiveness and care. The fear loosened and I smiled, excited for the future we would all build together.

I leaned forward, rested my forehead against Zaide’s, and closed my eyes. He felt all the turbulent emotions through the bond as I processed my feelings, and I felt his desire to question them. He didn’t. Instead, he cupped my face and kissed me.

“I love you,” I whispered against his lips, the words simple but carrying the weight of everything unsaid—my gratitude for his healing nature, my

appreciation for his strength and wisdom, my joy at discovering new possibilities for our future together.

"And I love you," he replied, the words as serious as any vow. "More each day, as I discover how awe-inspiring you are."

As I took his lips again in a passionate kiss, I bit and sucked on his lip; the blood hitting my tongue like a treat. His moan was its own reward, and his hands gripped my hair tighter. With my soul mates, I was learning to appreciate all the ways they wanted to touch, caress, and grip me.

Fortunately, Janice and Laura returned just as we left the room. They thanked us, Janice with tears in her eyes and a trembling grip on our hands as we said our goodbyes. Laura followed us out, guiding us back up the stairs and pointed us toward where the ward barrier ended so we could make a portal.

* * *

We stepped through the portal in unison, the familiar disorientation of transit lasting only moments before we emerged on the other side. I'd targeted the back garden of Charlie's house—a safe, private location where our sudden appearance wouldn't attract unwanted attention.

Charlie's house stood before us, its familiar facade intact but completely encircled by a pulsating, unyielding ring of fire that rose at least fifteen feet high. The flames weren't natural—they burned with a stillness, neither spreading nor consuming what they touched, their color a deep crimson threaded with veins of black.

The heat radiating from the fire circle was intense enough to feel from where we stood, yet the house itself appeared untouched, as if the flames were a boundary rather than a weapon.

Most disturbing was the absolute silence. No crackling of fire, no sounds from within the house, not even the normal neighborhood noises of distant vehicles or animals. Just eerie, complete silence, as if the fire ring had created a pocket of isolation from the rest of the world.

"Clawdia!" Zaide screamed.

CHAPTER 27

CLAWDIA

Something felt wrong. I awoke from my nap in the dark to find that all my men were still gone, doing their various jobs to save the realm. I felt redundant but also grateful for the rest.

I checked in on Savida and Daithi, who were curled up with each other in bed, fast asleep, and smiled at the sight of them. *They are so cute.* Savida's wings wrapped around them like a cocoon, and his red hair flopped onto the pillow, revealing his horns.

As I walked down the stairs, déjà vu struck me, and I frowned at the sensation. I looked over the banister and into the living room, but nothing struck me as strange. Until I stepped down again and froze.

Fafnir stood in the doorway. The door had been smashed into wooden pieces on the floor, although I hadn't heard a thing. He was framed by the red light from a fire wall as tall as the house itself, which burned yet made no noise. It made him look like the devil.

Yet I heard my gasp and shivered as I met his gaze. Fear choked me.

Eyes so dark they could have been black bore into me, pinning me in place on the stairs. His slick back hair glowed from the fire outside, and his handsome face wore a threatening smile, revealing perfect teeth.

"Hello, wife." He leaned against the door frame casually as I struggled for breath. "Or should I have started this another way? Do you not get bored when the reality is a repetition of something you've already seen in a vision? Perhaps I should start my greeting with Jewel since I didn't call you that in the other versions of the future you glimpsed."

My eyes widened as I realized what he was telling me.

It was him. He was in my dreamscape. He was the shadow thing watching me.

He didn't need my questions or encouragement to continue. Since he was so sure he'd won, he wanted to brag about outsmarting us.

"Oh yes, you thought you were safe from me, but I found you in your dreams, seeing the future of my attack. I saw it all."

"How?" I croaked. My hands shook, and my mind spun as hope faded in my heart.

If he saw what I did, we have no advantage. I'm alone. I can't contact the others or use my threads. What am I going to do?

"Remember this?" From his pocket, he pulled out a white lace ribbon. One I recognized as the one my mother tied in my hair the day I was married. "I found it in a box of my belongings, which my witches had stored for me. Very helpful of them, because it allowed me to find you in your dreams."

How did he know he would see visions in my dreamscape? I didn't even know that. He must have read the question in my face or, even more horrifying, my mind, because he responded as though I'd spoken aloud.

"I once met a faei who was a seer. He told me dreams are protective and allow us to process information that could damage us when we are conscious. I knew, as a new seer, you would rely on the dreamscape. And I was right. Although, I have to say, I found myself quite uninspiring in those visions, so I've taken the time to really, truly plan this out."

I heard the threat in his words, and fear took over. I backed away, my mind racing through options, then my body shimmered, form blurred as bones shifted, muscles reconfigured. In the space between heartbeats, I was no longer human but a cat.

Fafnir's laugh echoed through the house, a sound that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Changing forms won't save you."

In the horror films, running up the stairs meant the hero became trapped on the roof with the villain, but I didn't want to be a stupid, fear-driven heroine who needlessly died.

I jumped through the spindles of the stairs, landing on the table below, knocking off the pint-glass with the dead flower I'd "caught." I'd been meaning to throw it away for days, and as I dodged the shards of glass, my paws scrambling in the filthy water, I wished I had.

I raced into the kitchen and jumped onto the table, then onto the counter, and just as I launched myself from the counter and toward the open window, invisible hands seized me. I struggled and squirmed against the binding spell, throwing every scrap of energy I possessed against it, but I remained frozen mid-air. Trapped.

“You thought you could escape that way, Jewel? When you know I can stop you from moving with just a few words of a dark spell?” He sighed and shook his head as he walked into the kitchen after me. “I’m embarrassed for you.”

Panicking, I continued to strain against the spell, but nothing worked, and with every step he took closer, the faster my heart beat. Without thinking, I changed form and let out a whoop of delight, overjoyed to be free of the spell. But I didn’t move. I remained frozen. Only now, I was frozen, naked and bare to a man who beat me and tried to rape me.

My eyes widened as he approached me, his gaze looking over my body. I felt cold.

“And to think I could have enjoyed such a lovely body before you took it from me.” He narrowed his eyes and ran a finger over my thigh. “Maybe I’ll do it now, while you’re at my mercy. Perhaps then I’ll sate this unquenchable desire and curiosity I have for you.”

“Don’t,” I spat. “Don’t touch me.”

“You’re in no position to tell me what to do. You were my wife, and you belonged to me.” He gripped my jaw, his thumb and finger digging into my cheeks. “Do you know what steps I took to crush your soul so I may unlock the magic you possessed? It should have been mine, but you took it from me before I could reap my rewards.”

“I’d do it again,” I said, trembling.

I might have to. I don’t want to die, but I’d sooner take my life, and the lives of my bonds if it stopped him from getting what he wanted from us.

He let out a cruel laugh. “You won’t get the chance. This time, I can hold you still because I took the time to practice my power, to use it to my benefit, to mold it and build it to a power greater than all other witches. I’m not crushed under the weight of rules or morality. I transcended them and now I’m feared. Unstoppable.”

I have to do something … but what? I couldn’t use my threads. I couldn’t contact the others. I had to believe that they could sense something strange with the bond or even see the fire outside.

I just need to stall. I have to get him … monologuing. Please let Charlie be right about the monologuing.

My voice trembled as I replied, “Yet all you want is to be human, a hunter.”

“What do you know about it?” His eyes flashed dangerously, but I couldn’t allow that to scare me.

“I know all about it, Fafnir. You were an innocent young boy, and your village was wrong to treat you so poorly for being different. The hunters were kind to you only because they thought you were human. They would have killed you if they knew you were anything else, but you craved that affection too much to leave as you should have. You should have found haven with someone who could love you for you.”

His one hand gripped my throat, cutting off my air, while the other squeezed my thigh so hard his nails cut my skin.

“Don’t pity me!” he screamed. “The hunters and my children loved me, but I am not a child seeking love anymore. I’m seeking revenge and glory.”

He took a deep breath and relaxed his grip on my neck, allowing me to take a desperate gulp of air. Then he trailed a finger from my neck and down my sternum, stopping between my breasts.

He stared and drew something on my skin as he confessed softly, “I will tell you a secret. I’m going to take the magic from you and your mates to complete a new spell. One which will wipe the memories of my descendants and the hunters so I can rejoin them, destroy the supernaturals of the human realm, all the while becoming the most powerful being in the world.”

He looked up and smiled so widely I shivered. Then he looked back down at my body, and every part of me strained against the magic that held me so I could hide myself from him.

I knew I was in real danger of being raped unless I could distract him, so stuttering and completely terrified, I asked, “How d—does separating from your d—dragon make you more p—powerful?”

I distracted him, but I also enraged him again. His lip curled, his nostrils flared, and his hand wrapped around my throat again, squeezing so hard I thought my head was popping off my shoulders.

“You weren’t supposed to kill it. The stupid beast wanted freedom, and I wanted another weapon to control. It was the perfect plan until you murdered it.” He growled, spittle hitting my cheek, but he sighed, released

my neck, and backed away. “Now, as nice as it’s been to catch up, Jewel, it’s time for you to die.”

He muttered something, and then the blade appeared in his hand. The one that killed Winnie. The one Mary made for him to poison the victim. The mesmerizing, enchanted dagger that had decorated the mantlepiece in their rented home.

I gasped and coughed, my throat burning and so sore I couldn’t even protest.

“You recognize it, no?” He sneered. “I thought it was a nice touch, killing you with the blade that should have killed you, along with your witch. But you’ve always been able to escape the tightest of nooses.”

The dagger in Fafnir’s hand struck in a blur of motion, its blade gleaming with the reflection of the red fire light as it cut through the air toward my throat.

I closed my eyes as they filled with tears. Regrets crossed my mind in a flash, and I longed to tell my men, my soul bonds, how much I loved them before we perished. I hoped they knew.

My muscles tensed as I waited for the killing blow, but the enchanted metal only caressed my neck in a whisper soft, almost painless, slice. My eyes shot open, and he laughed.

“I’m not letting you die so quickly,” he said simply. “I’ve waited a long time to take your magic, and poisoning you is revenge.”

“Why?” I croaked, my eyes glassy with tears that I wouldn’t let fall. He took too much joy in torturing me, and I wouldn’t let him see me cry, too.

He played with the knife as he told me a story. “When I first saw you on a bus, you were going to the hospital. I knew you weren’t a witch. I tried to take your magic, but it was locked away. Imagine my surprise when I went to your family home and found your father drunk and your mother so disinterested. It was almost too easy.”

Each breath felt like swallowing broken glass, but it wasn’t just the strangulation causing pain. It was the burning heat of poison spreading from the wound through my veins.

“I discovered your father was a distant relative. Apparently, my father had another child when I left. One who had more children. Even though he had no dragon, we had a family bond in which I spoke to him. I ensured the whispers in his mind never stopped. I ensured he was disgusted every time he saw you. He did the rest.”

I knew it already, but hearing him confess to it, to torturing me through my family before we'd even met, infuriated me.

"You were broken and perfect for the magic in your soul to be snatched, but even then, after you lost everything, you were still untouchable. Not a witch. Not a human. Not a dragon. A titan soul pair. The weak side. I guessed at it only when I was researching the realms after you'd died, and I was right."

His hand wrapped around my calf, the touch burning so cold I shivered, and the horrible sensations of his magic-stealing spell began, working in tandem with the poison to make me scream. Streaks of fire danced along my veins, and his spell reached the magic in my soul and yanked until it spilled out.

"Your power … it's delicious. I can do so much with it. I'm almost glad it worked out this way, because now you have more powerful bonds for me to draw on, too."

I'm going to die. We are all going to die.

Just then, in a state of complete despair and delirium, inspiration struck me like lightning. Like the flash of a vision, information came together in my mind with a clap, and the jigsaw slotted together, giving me a way out.

It's risky. It's so risky. But if I trust in fate to save me like Nisha said, then maybe it would save us … rather than kill us.

Blocking out the pain as much as I could, I reached within myself where my bonds connected my souls to my men. Charlie's bond was where I concentrated, especially on the black smokey line that ran through the bond. *Our tether?* I wasn't sure, but I hoped it was. I hoped I could use it as a weapon against Fafnir in a last attempt to survive.

As I pulled at the black string, it lifted from the golden, thicker, and sturdy bond like a burned strand in wool. It crackled and faded away as I tried to disentangle it.

I was shaking and sweating from the pain of the poison and having my magic drained, but separating that bond from Charlie, from the golden bond, was like trying to unpick stitches from my heart while it still beat. The separation sent shards of pain through my entire being. It was excruciating. Not just physically, but emotionally, too.

As I ripped it out, I felt as if I'd cut away a piece of my soul and cast it adrift. Yet the golden bond to Charlie remained intact, although still muted, and I was still breathing … for now.

It seemed I wasn’t saying goodbye to Charlie. No, I was saying goodbye to something just as essential.

My familiar form.

The shadow magic which had brought me back to life, given me a second chance, and offered me the comfort of living as a cat as I healed from my past.

I mourned losing it already. I hated that I would never feel that safety again. I would never feel the kind of confidence a cat had, the agility, the shield from all the troubles of the world.

But I didn't need it anymore. I might have started my new life with scars from my past, but with the love and support of my new family, I was able to push past all the fears that kept me shackled to my familiar form.

So, I could sacrifice it to save us all.

It tried to escape, straining and wiggling in my grip, desperate to return to its homeland. I wasn’t supposed to use it like this. I wasn’t a shadow. I’d been lent the power, but I didn’t let the smokey black line go. I held on like a drowning person clings to a lifeline.

It was my lifeline. My last hope.

As my breathing faltered, as Fafnir stole my magic, as the poison set into my blood, making me delirious, I threw that shadow bond, that tether, at Fafnir.

I felt the moment it connected. His surprise and confusion filtered back to me like waves. But he didn’t know this magic. He hadn’t prepared for it and didn’t understand what I was doing until it was too late.

All the pain I currently felt, all the suffering he caused me in my last life, all the memories I had of his cruelty, I channeled back to him like a tidal wave. I drowned him in all the misery I’d ever experienced. I even showed him memories of his own past.

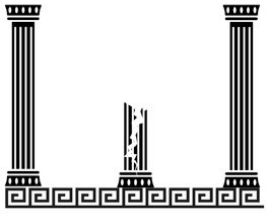
“You’re getting exactly what you deserve, you monster.”

He crashed to the floor, knocking over the table, gasping and clutching at his throat. His magic faltered. I fell to the counter as his spell released me but didn’t break my concentration. The tsunami of pain made his eyes bulge, and his hand released the dagger.

I picked up the knife and whispered, “You thought you’d won, but you underestimated me. I might die from poison, but I’m going to make sure that you reap what you sow and die exactly the same way.”

CHAPTER 28

ZAIDE



Flames filled my gaze, yet my heart froze in my chest as Charlie charged over the fence with raw panic in his eyes. I knew then. *Clawdia is facing Fafnir alone. We left her, and he attacked.*

I couldn't reach her through our bond, meaning, as her first vision had predicted, he'd prevented her from using her powers.

"I saw the blue," he said in a rushed explanation. His usually messy brown hair was wild, as though he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. His eyes were wide with panic that made my stomach clench. "I can't get in. The fire-retardant potion didn't work on me." He showed us his hand, which was red and blistered. "But he's in there, and something just happened to our bond. I can't feel her. We need to get in there now, or we're all dead."

"Explain," Baelen commanded.

Charlie clutched at his chest, fingers digging into his shirt as though he could physically grasp the severed connection. "It just … snapped. Something is still there, but something else snapped." His voice cracked. "I'm still alive, so I'm taking it as a win, but I'm not sure for how much longer."

My own panic rising, I took a deep breath and healed his hand. He didn't notice. His eyes stared frantically at the fire, searching for a way through the wall.

"You're a dragon, Charlie. Your scales will protect you," Baelen urged. "Change."

"It's not a normal fire," he replied.

“We can heal you,” I promised.

He nodded; then his fragile human body changed into a golden beast that rivaled the size of the house. He roared, and I held my breath as he walked through the flames … just as they flickered out.

Luck? Or something worse?

We didn’t hesitate. Baelen and I raced toward the house as Charlie changed back to human and followed us.

Through the window into the kitchen, we could see a battlefield. Furniture was overturned. Walls were spotted with blood.

We charged through the back door, immediately freezing at the sight in front of us. Clawdia was crouched in her human form, naked, her golden hair streaked with blood, and in her hand was a gleaming silver dagger that seemed to absorb the firelight rather than reflect it.

Fafnir lay crumbled in front of her. She looked … proud? Smug? I’d never seen her with such an expression, but despite her injury and the terrible sheen to her skin, it was clear she believed she’d won.

My heart lightened as she lunged forward, the dagger aimed at his heart. Fafnir twisted at the last second but not quickly enough to avoid the blade entirely. It sank into his shoulder, and he let out a roar.

I stood transfixed. Her eyes burned with a fierce, determined violet light as she thrust the blade forward again and again, forcing Fafnir to retreat, dragging his body to the back of the kitchen.

She landed another blow, this time to the chest, and his hands scrambled at the blade, clawing at the skin of her arms and wrists. She let go of the blade as he collapsed to the floor.

She did it? She’s killed him?

There was nothing but the sound of our heavy, rapid breathing as we waited. It felt too good to be true.

She turned around to face us, a tired smile pulling her lips up as her eyes fluttered with weakness. We took a step forward, and I reached for her threads to heal her, only to find that my power had not returned with the death of Fafnir.

My gaze flicked to the puddle of blood and flesh on the floor behind her and gasped when I saw his hand move to the dagger’s hilt. His fingers wrapped around it with deliberate slowness. Blood bubbled from the corner of his mouth, running down his chin in a thin crimson line. His smile was

terrible to behold—the smile of a being who had lived for centuries and had no intention of facing death alone.

With a sudden movement that belied his wounded state, he yanked the dagger from his chest. A fresh gout of blood followed it, spattering across the checkered floor.

“Clawdia!” I shouted in warning.

Time seemed to slow and stretch. I saw every horrible detail with preternatural clarity. Fafnir’s bloody fingers tightened around the dagger’s hilt. His position shifted as he gathered what remained of his strength.

Clawdia’s eyes widened as she turned and realized her mistake.

I tried to move, but my limbs felt leaden, my movements sluggish as though I were wading through deep water. Baelen lunged forward, but even his supernatural speed seemed insufficient against the inexorable flow of these terrible seconds.

“If I am to die,” he snarled, “then you will all accompany me.”

He lunged toward Clawdia, the dagger aimed at her heart.

Just when I thought my heart would stop from pure panic, Daithi arrived, his angular features set in an expression of fierce determination. His eyes burned with urgent purpose as he pushed Clawdia out of the way, into Charlie’s arms, and raised his own weapon in defense.

A book?

The blow meant for Clawdia plunged through the pages of a thick book, only grazing Daithi’s chest before Fafnir roared, his breathing ragged and wet as he tugged the blade out.

Savida charged into the kitchen, his demonic wings partially unfurled ready for flight, but his entry caused Daithi to make the same mistake Clawdia made.

Daithi looked at him and mouthed something, just as Fafnir’s dying body, animated by pure evil, lurched forward and drove the enchanted blade into his heart.

A scream lodged in my throat, trapped there by the horror of what I was witnessing. Time seemed to resume its normal pace, rushing forward with cruel momentum.

“Daithi!” Savida cried, his wings spreading wider as he reached out with desperate fingers that would close on empty air as Daithi crumbled to the ground.

Finally breaking free from the momentary paralysis, I lunged forward too, knowing even as I moved, I would be too late.

Savida reached him first, his demonic wings carrying him across the room faster than any of us could move. His face transformed from its usual cheerful expression to one of absolute anguish, the kind of naked emotion that made my chest ache in sympathy.

“Daithi,” he breathed. He looked up at us, desperately. “Heal him. I can’t—”

“It’s not working,” I gasped. No matter how I looked, the threads weren’t there. I couldn’t help. I couldn’t save them.

“Kill that bastard faster!” Charlie yelled as Clawdia collapsed gasping, a wet, bubbling sound escaping her, sending my pulse racing.

Fafnir had collapsed to his knees, blood pouring from his wound, but his eyes gleamed with savage satisfaction. Even in his final moments, he took pleasure in the pain he had caused.

“Spell … fixed … time.” Fafnir let out a laugh.

We can’t use our power until an allotted time. His death wouldn’t allow us our power so we could heal our dying.

But it would make me feel better.

I gripped his neck and squeezed, crushing it until he died, and tossed his body to the ground and spat on it.

Then I turned to the nightmare unraveling in front of me. My soul pair and my savior, both injured with no way to save them. And if they died, so would we.

“You guys portaled in. Maybe the garden is outside the spell,” Charlie rushed out.

Without any more instruction, Baelen scooped Clawdia up and rushed outside, Charlie following, as I helped Savida pick up Daithi. Blood poured from him like a cataract, lining the ground in red, and he didn’t make a sound as we moved him.

We laid them down together in the grass outside of the burned ring and surrounded them, but still, our powers were gone. We couldn’t even create a portal out of this spell’s grasp.

“You can’t leave me, Clawdicat. You can’t give me everything and then take it away.” Charlie’s voice broke, and a tear tracked down his face as stroked her still arm and face. “It’s not fair.”

His bond snapped—he thinks we will all die but him.

Breathing was difficult as I watched my soul pair die for the second time. Her eyes were clouded, her skin cold, and her breaths so shallow I knew she didn't have long. We didn't have long. This time, I didn't pray to my gods. I only held Baelen's shaking hand as we waited for a miracle.

"There has to be something we can do. A potion. A spell. An artifact." Baelen quivered. "It can't end like this."

"I'm sorry," Daithi whispered, his voice barely audible. His fingers trembled as they clutched at Savida, and a single tear tracked down Savida's dark cheek. "We should … have had … more time."

Savida pleaded, his voice dropping to a desperate whisper, "We have to see the mummies. You promised we'd travel this realm. I'm not ready."

"In … our next life."

Savida made a sound of pure anguish, pressing his forehead against Daithi's. "No," he pleaded, his wings curling around them both in a protective cocoon.

Daithi's green eyes locked with mine briefly, and with emotion choking me, tears pouring silently, I took the moment to say, "Thank you. For everything. For rescuing me. For bringing me here to meet them. For attempting to save her life—our lives. I hope we meet again in our next life so I can repay that debt."

Savida squeezed my hand and sobbed. "You brought us new adventures and life. There is no debt, only love."

"I hope there's cheese wherever you're going, Savida," Charlie croaked with a trembling smile. "Daithi, you're a moody bastard, but you changed my life the day you saw me and sent me a scam email. I'm so grateful."

The night air filled with our grief, a grief so profound it caused the skies to cry and splashed us with its tears.

Savida's cry shattered whatever stunned silence had fallen over us. It wasn't a human sound—not even close.

He wrapped his wings tighter around them, as though he could somehow shield Daithi from death itself. Tears fell from his eyes onto Daithi's face, tracing clean lines through the blood that had splattered there. I touched my faei friend as his chest lifted and rose for the final time, and Savida shuddered as he sobbed over him.

"No," he keened, rocking Daithi's body against his chest. "Not like this. Please, not like this."

Goodbye, my friend. May your spirit find rest before you begin life anew.

In the corner of my clouded eyes, I saw Baelen shake his head, lost for words, his face the picture of devastation as he cupped Clawdia's jaw and stared, as though trying to absorb her image. She was gasping, a wet and terrifying sound, completely unaware of us in her suffering.

We'd lose her next. We'd join Daithi and Savida in death soon, only we wouldn't get the privilege of goodbyes.

Then Baelen gasped. "Threads."

Our power returned.

Within seconds, I funneled power into any threads surrounding me. There was no finesse to my actions, only a flood of desperation to save us all.

Then I blacked out.

CHAPTER 29

CLAWDIA

I dreamed I was transforming, like a butterfly shucking away its cocoon and spreading its wings for the first time. I dreamed I touched the sky and danced in the clouds, flying with another…

Who is that?

Before I could look, loud, chaotic noises broke the dream, and I came crashing down to earth, bringing the feeling of residual pain echoing in my body back to my attention.

"Is he okay? What's happening?"

I sulked, hating being disturbed when I was having such a lovely dream, but roused.

Memories of the last few hours flashed in my mind, and I gasped. My eyes blinked open rapidly, then shut again as the rain continued to lash down, hitting me painfully. I shivered and rolled to my front, my hair falling around my face. I was aware that hands touched me, but I couldn't tell who was who.

Is this pain residual?

It felt like it was getting worse. My skin burned hot, then cold, then searing hot again, and a moan fell from my lips. Then my moan turned to a beastly growl as my skin stretched, and my bones contorted, realigning under muscles that were suddenly too large.

My body changed, similarly it did to when I changed into my familiar form.

But that's not possible. I gave my shadow power away. I broke my familiar bond with Charlie. I'm no longer a familiar. So what's happening

to me?

"Holy fuck." *Was that Charlie's voice?*

I tried to turn to see him, but I felt heavy. My center of gravity was off, and I stumbled.

Someone gasped. "Help me move him out of the way."

Was that Baelen? Why can't I see?

Panic rose in my throat, and a strange noise, like a whimper and a growl mixed together, escaped me. It made me pause.

Why am I making that noise? What am I?

"What the fuck did he do?" Charlie asked.

"I'm not sure," Baelen replied.

Where's Zaide? Why can't I hear him?

And Savida and Daithi? Did they survive? Did Zaide heal us all?

But I didn't feel healed. I felt … more. Bigger. Powerful. Fierce. Protected.

It was how I felt when I was a cat, and yet that wasn't possible. *Was it?*

Something caressed my mind, like the brush of silk over skin. It was strange but not unwelcome. It calmed me.

"All is well," a voice whispered. *"We are displaying how fierce we are for our mates. It is our way."*

I couldn't question the words because it was the voice that shocked me. It was my voice, but the thought didn't come from me. It spoke *to* me.

"What is happening?" Zaide's groaned question was when I finally opened my eyes, only to stare into Charlie's bedroom window.

"Clawdia," Charlie gasped, and I looked down at the grass, where he gaped up at me with awe and shock. Zaide and Baelen had similar expressions, although Zaide was still lying on the floor.

I could breathe again, though each inhale felt different, deeper, filling lungs far larger than I'd ever possessed. My senses sharpened—I could hear the neighbors three houses down arguing about dinner plans, smell the rain in the clouds, see dust particles dancing in the air with perfect clarity.

Why are they so small? What am I?

There was such a confusing bunch of emotions and strange sensations that I couldn't breathe for a moment. I felt weightless yet heavy; I felt out of control but calm; I felt assured and yet panicked.

"Mate," Dralie whispered in my head. *"You are glorious."*

His words gave me all the answers I needed, and relief almost brought me to my knees. *Our mate bond is still there, and I'm a dragon? How?*

Zaide hiccuped a sob as he rose to his feet. His hand contacted my scales, and a current of energy passed between us, reigniting our bonds. Their joy at my survival, their shock at my new form, and their grief from losing Daithi and Savida flooded my senses.

"Little Cat-dragon. I'm so glad you're alive. I thought we were all about to die." He stroked my leg, itching a sensitive scale, and I wanted to change back, to hug him, because we both needed it so much.

But the voice whispered again, *"We need his approval first."*

"Who's approval?" I tried to ask the voice, but she didn't reply.

I'm going mad. I'm a mad dragon.

"Are you all right?" Baelen asked, and I attempted to nod. His frown lines softened, so I assumed my body moved in a way that assured him.

My dragon body.

"You are golden, just like Charlie. Your scales shimmer like treasures."

"There's a violet glint to them. They almost glow," Baelen added as he joined Zaide on the other side of my leg and petted me.

Charlie looked dumbstruck, his hand running through his hair and his eyes darting all over my body.

Dralie's voice cut through the chaos of my mind. *"Oh, my mate, we are going to have such a joyous time flying together. And guarding the apples. Won't you speak to me? I understand this is a shock, but I long to hear your voice."*

"Dralie, it's just me. There's no dragon-Clawdia in here. Something must have gone wrong."

"All is exactly as it should be, my mate. You are perfect."

"It's … fine?"

"Females stay hidden until they find a mate they believe can protect them and give them strong offspring. They don't make themselves known and instead become one with their drakorian. You've probably felt her and heard her influence in different ways."

"She's not like you?" A fixture in Charlie's mind? Distinguishable from Charlie himself? A being with its own personality?

"She's sneaky."

"I am here, mate," the other me whispered. *"We are as we've always meant to be. Do you accept the bond?"*

It was a repeat of what Dralie had asked me when he first appeared to me, and I suddenly understood what was happening.

When Charlie turned into a dragon, and when I accepted the mating bond, it triggered my change because I have drakorian blood. Yet both my familiar bond and my mate bond couldn't exist together anymore, and the familiar bond strangled our mate bond, which weakened because we hadn't completed the ritual.

It weakened until we could no longer hear each other.

He needed to accept the bond, accept us, to complete the ritual and strengthen our bond again. Then I could return to being human and comfort my other bonds.

I lowered my head carefully, bringing my face level with Charlie's. He didn't flinch, didn't back away. Instead, he pressed his forehead to the space between my eyes, a gesture of acceptance that made my new heart swell.

"Beautiful," he whispered, and I knew he meant it. He kissed my scales. "We accept the bond."

The sudden shock of power, happiness, and relief gripped me.

I flexed my wings experimentally, knocking down the fence, and then shifted back to my human form.

"Whoops," I said sheepishly.

All three men surrounded me in the warmest, most beautiful hug, all of them touching, kissing, and caressing me, so grateful that I survived. Tears pricked my eyes.

The love I felt in our bonds, in their touch, was all I wanted one hundred years ago.

I'd waited a long time, but it was worth it.

Thank you, God.

* * *

OUR happily ever after didn't start there. As they set me down, Zaide covered me in his shirt, and we turned our attention to Daithi and Savida.

I held his hand as we approached the bodies. Crouching beside the pale, stiff face of the faei who'd turned me into a human, I wiped some of the crusted blood from his perfect face, the rain helping to clean him and hide my tears.

“Thank you for saving me,” I whispered.

A vision, quick as a flash of lightning, struck me, and my eyes widened. *Could it be?*

Soft mumbling reached my ears, and I noticed tiny movements in the black wings covering them both. I smoothed back Savida’s red hair and jumped when his teary, swollen face looked up at me.

“I tried to save him, but he’s gone. He’s gone, but I’m still here. Why am I still here?” His sobs were almost incomprehensible.

“Savida, you’re still alive,” Zaide breathed, then pulled his friend into his arms. “Oh gods, you survived his loss.”

“Why? Why?” Savida cried. “I don’t want to live without him.”

I didn’t know why. By all accounts, he shouldn’t have.

“You can’t. You can’t.” Zaide shook him. “What would I do without you? You are my family. My savior. A brightness in my life.” His sobs were like stabs at my heart.

He might not have lost me, and Savida might be alive, but Zaide had lost both his friends and saviors. Savida would never be the same without his mate.

“He was my everything. How can I live in a world without him? He has made me. He saved me too, and I’m to repay him by living when I could have eternity with him in our next lives?”

Charlie joined us, placing a hand on the demon’s trembling shoulder. “You have to stay with us, mate. We won't let you fade away. Daithi loved you, but he would have wanted you to survive this. To live. He’ll be waiting for you in your next life.”

“He wanted me with him forever. He told me so. He wouldn’t want to be away from me.” Savida struggled against Zaide’s embrace and Charlie’s hand, breathing heavily. “Let me go. I won’t leave him.”

“You can’t escape this pain, Savida. I’m so sorry, but you can’t follow him, either.” His dark eyes scanned mine desperately. “What if you never meet in your next life? What if this was all the time you ever have together? Wouldn’t you prefer to remember? To hold those memories dear?”

“Do you know something?” he whispered. “How did I survive the death of my mate?”

“I know you have another mate out there waiting to meet you and a family who have missed you every day since you were stolen from them. You’ll meet them if you don’t lose yourself to this grief.”

“A mate? Family?” He shook his head. “No. No. I can’t betray him.”

“It’s perfectly understandable you don’t want to meet a new mate or your family when you’ve just lost the only family you’ve ever known. But eventually, when your heart has healed, when hope doesn’t feel so foreign and you remember your joy and curiosity for life, you’ll meet them, and you’ll know that this is exactly the reason you survived. You’ll be glad for it because you’ll be so, so happy.”

“Your future sounds like a story you tell younglings.”

“Maybe Daithi’s soul will find you again in this life, too.” Baelen rested his hand on my back, adding a print of warmth to my shivering body.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry you’ve lost him. I’m sorry I couldn’t save him.” Zaide held him tighter, choking on tears.

Charlie added softly, “He was a hero, Savida. He saved Clawdia’s life. He didn’t know he would leave you.”

“He knew. He knew. I could tell from his face. He apologized.”

“Please don’t do anything silly,” I begged. “Let’s plan a celebration of his life. Let’s lay him to rest and take everything one day at a time.”

“My mind is so dark,” he whispered, sagging into Zaide’s arms, finally accepting the comfort and turning his head into Zaide's neck.

“Even the night sky has stars, Savida. Look for them, and I promise you, your future will be bright once more.”

* * *

ELIZABETH RETURNED in time to help us clean the kitchen and stomp on Fafnir’s body. Savida took out a lot of his feelings that way. We showered and dressed and ate, but mostly, we were in a state of shock. It was over. We’d won. But it felt like we’d lost.

Zaide tucked Savida into bed and placed the nightlight on for him but returned to us in the living room, concerned.

“I don’t like leaving him. Maybe we should stay with him tonight,” he suggested as he sank into the loveseat.

I nodded. “We’ll drag the mattresses in.”

It would ease my mind to watch over him, too. He was in a dangerous place.

“I can’t sleep right now. I’m too wired,” Charlie added, his fingers drawing patterns on my knuckles. “I can’t fucking believe it.”

“He saved me,” I whispered. The guilt I felt only made my sadness ache more. Savida was without his soul mate because I couldn’t move out of the way fast enough.

“Do you think he knew? Like Savida said? He’d been acting strange.” Zaide asked, his purple eyes big and watery.

“I’m not sure. But regardless of why, he helped us end this. He’s a hero.”

“What will we do now?” Baelen asked, rubbing my knee.

“I’m certain Charlie made a list,” I replied, sighing as I contemplated how much more there was for us to do.

“Fuck that,” Charlie protested. “After the funeral, let’s go on holiday. We’ve earned a break before we start on the next thing.”

“Savida will need us,” Zaide added. “But I’m sure being away from here will help him.”

“We will need to copulate in the sky,” Dralie’s voice added quietly, as if he wasn’t sure he should mention it.

I raised a brow. *“Need to?”*

“It’s part of the bonding ritual.”

Charlie shook his head and laughed. “You’re a kinky fuck, Dralie.”

EPILOGUE

CLAWDIA

Blue sky and sun, the like I'd certainly never seen in England, shone down on me. It was heaven, and I sighed happily as I relaxed on a canopied bed in the Maldives a month after I almost died. Again.

My skin was warm and pink, my feet had the remnants of soft sand between my toes, and I listened to the sound of waves. Not to mention, I was wearing a bikini that, had I worn it in public a hundred years ago, would have seen me hung.

I couldn't help feeling smug about that. I also felt smug as a man in a white shirt and black bowtie served me yet another cocktail of alcohol with all the reverence of a proper servant.

My emotions didn't go unnoticed, and a male hand stroked my thigh. "You're enjoying that a little too much."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," I teased.

"You know exactly what I mean." Charlie pushed down his sunglasses and narrowed his eyes playfully. "I could put on a little apron if it's going to make you feel so powerful."

I laughed, and my drink wiggled in the triangular glass. "I'm sure you would." I kissed him squarely, then smiled. "You're ridiculous, but I love you."

"I love you too, and I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. Even if it's watching another man serve you."

He scratched his stomach, drawing my attention to his naked chest. Beads of water from his dip in the ocean still clung to his muscled chest, and I bit my lip.

He, Zaide, Baelen, and Savida started training together—a combination of weaponry practice, hand-to-hand combat, and general exercise. It started to help Savida, but it had other benefits.

Lust bubbled across the bond to Charlie as I whispered, “You’ve served me in plenty of other ways.”

“Hmmm, you’re right about that.” His hand glided up my thigh as he leaned closer, about to kiss me.

“I was thinking about how you’d sacrifice a toilet roll for me to shred.”

He narrowed his eyes, and his lip curled. “You’ve ruined it.”

I couldn’t help laughing again. It was such a relief to be able to feel such joy again.

The last few weeks had been hard. After Daithi’s funeral in Álfheimr, Savida didn’t move from bed for weeks. We stayed with him in their home, doing everything we could to rouse him, even trying to bribe him with a block of cheese to get him into the shower, but nothing worked.

Despite it being our first time in another realm, Charlie and I didn’t get to explore much outside of that home.

We did, however, go flying together and complete our bonding ritual. I won’t go into detail—what happens in the sky should stay in the sky—but it was special, and our bond only strengthened.

Savida’s catatonia reminded us of that terrible time when his body lay fireless and empty, and despite my vision of him living happily with another soul mate and playing with our children, I doubted he would survive the loss of Daithi.

Eventually, we dragged Alcor to visit him. We don’t know the details of the conversation they had, but whatever Alcor said helped Savida in ways we hadn’t been able to. Moments after the blue-haired demon left, Savida showered and came downstairs to eat.

His battle with grief was a terrible one. Some days, we’d see glimmers of his previous joyous self, and other days, he was so sad he couldn't move. It broke our hearts, but we tried to be strong for him and supported him in the same way he supported Zaide when he was first freed.

When we brought up a holiday in the human realm, Savida told us to leave him with Alcor while we relaxed. He still felt guilty about enjoying himself, but it was nice that he was growing closer to someone.

Arabella and Isaac were still waiting for the day Alcor regained his memories and were hiding their relationship in the meantime. We felt guilty

keeping it from him since he was being so good with Savida, but ultimately, we didn't want him to suffer, even if that meant lying to him.

Elizabeth had taken the role of witch representative permanently and was busy coordinating the way forward for covens, familiars, and protection against otherworlder slavers. Apparently, her daughters didn't love the change, and Charlie had yet to meet his sisters. We'd tried to set up a date for after our holiday but had heard nothing back. Charlie didn't seem too upset about it, considering.

Omaira had taken the hunter academy spy suggestion to heart and planned to infiltrate it as a teacher. She'd lined up an interview and was working with Charlie and Isaac to create a disguise that would work against their magic detection devices. She seemed excited about the project, and knowing her story, I could see why. We eagerly awaited her findings.

Zaide approached the bed, his body glistening with the water from the sea, his smile wide. My eyes trailed after the drops that caressed his perfect chest, following the lines of his purple scars, and I licked my lips to prevent from drooling.

Charlie raised his eyebrow. "How are the swimming lessons going?"

Since Tartarus had very little open water, Zaide hadn't ever learned to swim. Nor had he bothered to learn when he was traveling through the realms with Daithi and Savida. So, Baelen offered to teach him on our little holiday.

Zaide frowned down at himself. "I don't think my body was meant for floating."

"Understandable." Charlie shrugged. "You're built like a brick shithouse."

"I don't know what that means, but it doesn't sound complimentary."

"You wouldn't have ever seen a brick outhouse, Charlie." I stuck my tongue out at him and sat up to reach for my titan. "You're gorgeous, Zaide, and you know it. Why don't you join us on this bed, and I'll show you how much."

"Clawdicat—" Charlie choked and plucked the glass from my hand. "You've had one too many drinks from Alejandro if you've forgotten that public sex is illegal."

I shrugged, feeling completely unrepentant and also a little drunk. "We can go back to our room."

Charlie bit my earlobe, prompting a startled and aroused gasp to escape my lips. He whispered, “All in good time.” I shivered, my nipples pointing as my body responded to the arousal flooding my veins.

Baelen wrapped an arm around Zaide and pressed a kiss to his shoulder as he asked, “Are you done swimming, Sunset?”

Baelen’s sunglasses were extra strength to help his eyes, but I could still feel a twinge of pain through our bond. He knew how much we wanted to be in the sun, and so he suffered and made the best of it. It only made me love him more, and I vowed to find a more permanent way to help him.

Charlie didn’t let Zaide reply. “No, he’s not. He’s trying to seduce Clawdia on my day, and it’s rude.”

“Who said it was your day?” I asked.

“We are having days?” Zaide frowned.

“Yesterday, you”—Charlie pointed at Baelen—“had her all to yourself when you took her to that midnight wine tasting, and you”—he pointed at Zaide—“took her to that yoga retreat the day before. It’s my day. I’m fed up with hanging out with you two.”

“Aw, Charlie. Are you feeling left out?” I pouted. “We can get you a male lover so you don’t feel alone when I’m not around.”

He knew I was joking because he’d watched me almost change into my dragon form and eat a man who flirted with him at the bar last night. No one would touch him but me.

“I don’t want—or need—anyone but you,” he whispered into my ear.

I raised an eyebrow, pretending indifference. “It must be your day, because you are saying all the right things to get exactly what you want.”

“I don’t recall a night he hasn’t had with you, Sunlight,” Baelen said as he sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed a towel over his hair. “He’s being a bit dramatic.”

“Dramatic is his default,” I replied, nodding and reaching to stroke my soul mate’s beautiful back.

“I don’t appreciate that sentiment right now,” Charlie said, pouting. He wrapped his arms around me and muttered against my neck, “but I’m getting lucky later, so you can say whatever you want.”

“You got lucky the day you met me,” I told him and then shrugged. “But you’re right. I’m a sure thing.”

They all laughed at me. “We need to get you drunk more often.”

“I think we should add fun things to our to-do list. Like getting drunk on different alcohols in every realm. It’s good for us to have a duty and purpose, but I don’t want us to forget to live too. This is to-do list worthy.” I finished my drink and sighed happily again.

This is the life.

“Whatever you wish, Little Cat.” Zaide’s gaze filled with all the love I felt in our bond every day.

“I might write a book. A memoir,” I announced, although I had the creativity of a spoon. “I’ll call it Tales of a Witch’s Familiar.”

“This memoir has us in it?” Zaide asked as he joined us at the bottom of the canopy bed, his skin as bright and gleaming as the sun. He picked up Baelen’s feet and began rubbing.

“I want to write my own chapters, Clawdicat,” Charlie announced. “It has to be a first-person perspective. It’s the best kind of perspective.”

“It’s biased.” Baelen crossed his arms and shook his head.

“Stories are biased. You have to dig for the truth. That’s the fun of them.”

Zaide tilted his head, and his white braid flopped into view. “You’ll need a new title for the next part of your story. You’re not just the familiar of a witch anymore.”

Charlie listed. “A drakorian mate, titan soul pair, akari-titan godling mated.”

“That will not fit on a book cover,” I told him with exaggerated exasperation.

“Fate’s Journey,” Baelen suggested.

Charlie buzzed like he was a red button on a talent show. “No. It’s basic, but I suppose we’ve got time to work on it.”

I wouldn’t need to write another part of the story. Our story wasn’t just ours anymore. We’d started something, but it affected so many others. It was the story of witches learning, under a new leader, how to protect themselves. It was about the last familiars in the human realm. It was the task team moving onto a new project and the shadow realm recovering. It was the titans being rescued from slavery, starting with Zaide’s siblings.

Just as Alejandro returned with another drink, a vision knocked on my mind, begging for entry. I was still working on controlling them, but bit by bit, it was getting easier. I also had Nisha supporting me with weekly

dreamscape meetings, and I've learned more about how not to get lost in both the dreams and visions.

As the flash of the future evaporated from my mind, I started laughing. It got progressively louder and more hysterical until tears were rolling down my cheeks, and I clutched my stomach.

"I'd love you to share the joke, Clawdicat."

"It's a funny vision?" Zaide asked.

"Hilarious," I managed to get out as I wiped my eyes and lay flat on my back, breathless and occasionally chuckling.

"Do tell," Baelen urged.

I grinned at him, knowing just how much this would please him. "I have the most perfect revenge for our shadow king. It's time to redeem a favor."

THANK YOU!

And that’s the end, folks.

Since I haven’t left you with a cliffhanger, I hope you’ll indulge me if I write a little more than I usually do for my acknowledgments.

After all this is my first completed series. (Yay!)

This book took me on a roller coaster of emotions. It was nostalgic to go back to Charlie’s house, where it all started and reflect on how far they’d all come, as well as how far I’ve come as an author. I want to thank you for following me and them on this journey.

It means so much to me that you’ve supported me and fallen in love with Clawdia and her bonds. I hope you loved the introduction of other characters and the mention of other stories too. I’m excited to write more in this universe and I’ve got endless ideas.

Endings can make or break a story so I was so anxious to get this right. I wanted something that felt hard-won but right for the characters and their future but it wasn’t until halfway through writing the book that I realized what needed to happen.

I hope this ending gave you everything you needed, something you didn’t want but will dwell on, and something which left you excited to know more.

The ending of this book felt especially poignant for me because I also lost my familiar.

Daisy, my beautiful 18-year old cat, my inspiration for this series and my bestie since I was 12 took a turn for the worse a few weeks before I finished this book.

By the time I’d send it to my editor for proofreading, she was so ill we made the heartbreaking decision to let her go.

Without realizing it, Clawdia saying goodbye to Clawdicat in the book echoed me saying goodbye to my gorgeous girl. And it’s been a hard goodbye. Like a child letting go of a comfort blanket, I’ve felt lost.

Which is partly why I can’t say goodbye to these characters yet. Writing this series has taken up such a huge part of my life and these characters feel like home, so I’m not ready to let them go.

They’ll live on in 12 extra chapters following what they are up to as they save the titans and clean up the realms. I’ll release one every month for the next year so follow me and sign up to my newsletter to make sure you get those. Clawdia and the gang will also return when other characters need them in other novels, so it’s never truly goodbye. After all, Zaide being reunited with his siblings will be a big moment we all want to see.

As always, I want to say a huge thank you to my family and friends.

Mom and Dad, without your support, love and encouragement I wouldn’t have spent three years pouring my soul into this series. I’d be richer but unhappy. You guys have never once made me feel like this was a mistake, you trust me and my vision for the future and your belief makes me even more determined to succeed.

Thank you for putting up with me, I am so grateful and so lucky to have you. Love you to the moon and back.

To my brothers, Henry, George and John, thank you for being terrible and hilarious. There are parts of you in these characters, the wit, the banter, the farts. And although you tease me, fight me, wind me up, and call me unemployed, you do help me make great stories.

To my friends, Danni, Jess, Jodie, Tom, Brad, Caitlin and Sarah you keep me sane. When I go into the writing cave, and the chat goes quiet, you don’t judge me for popping out a few months later and cramming all my social interactions into one week.

All of you are so special to me so keep dragging me out of the cave. I complain but I love you for it.

To my proofreader Victoria, and my cover designer Christian, this book, this series wouldn’t look half as good as it does now without you. You continue to make my dreams a reality and I can’t thank you enough.

Finally, to you. Thank you for taking the time to read the series, thank you for the reviews, the recommendations, the excitement and the messages. Writing can be a really lonely venture but when the end result is having such amazing and supportive readers, you make it all worthwhile.

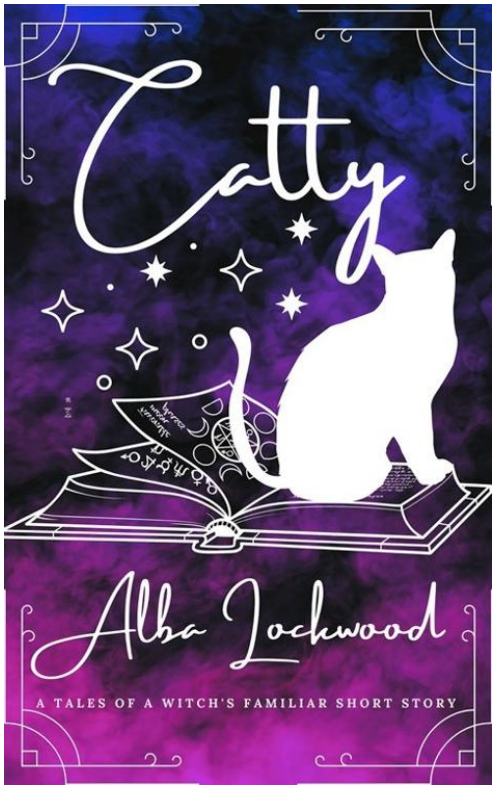
Whether you loved or hated Catharsis, please take a moment to leave a review and hopefully other wonderful readers will be able to find, read and love/hate with you.

Until next time!

FOLLOW FOR MORE FUN!

Need to share your frustration at the cliffhanger?
We're here for you!
Want to share pictures of your familiar?
Give me those cute pics!

Come and join the reader group The Familiar Forest Facebook page to talk about The Tales of a Witch's Familiar series.



You can also sign up to my newsletter and receive a short story called Catty which reveals more of Clawdia and Charlie's hilarious relationship before the start of Catalyst!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alba Lockwood writes reverse harem, paranormal romance and fantasy. When she isn't writing about cats, witches, Gods and other realms, you can find her losing sleep reading books from other amazing authors such as Katie May, Raven Kennedy, Tate James and Jaymin Eve.

Alba is from and currently resides in Birmingham, England with her parents and brothers.